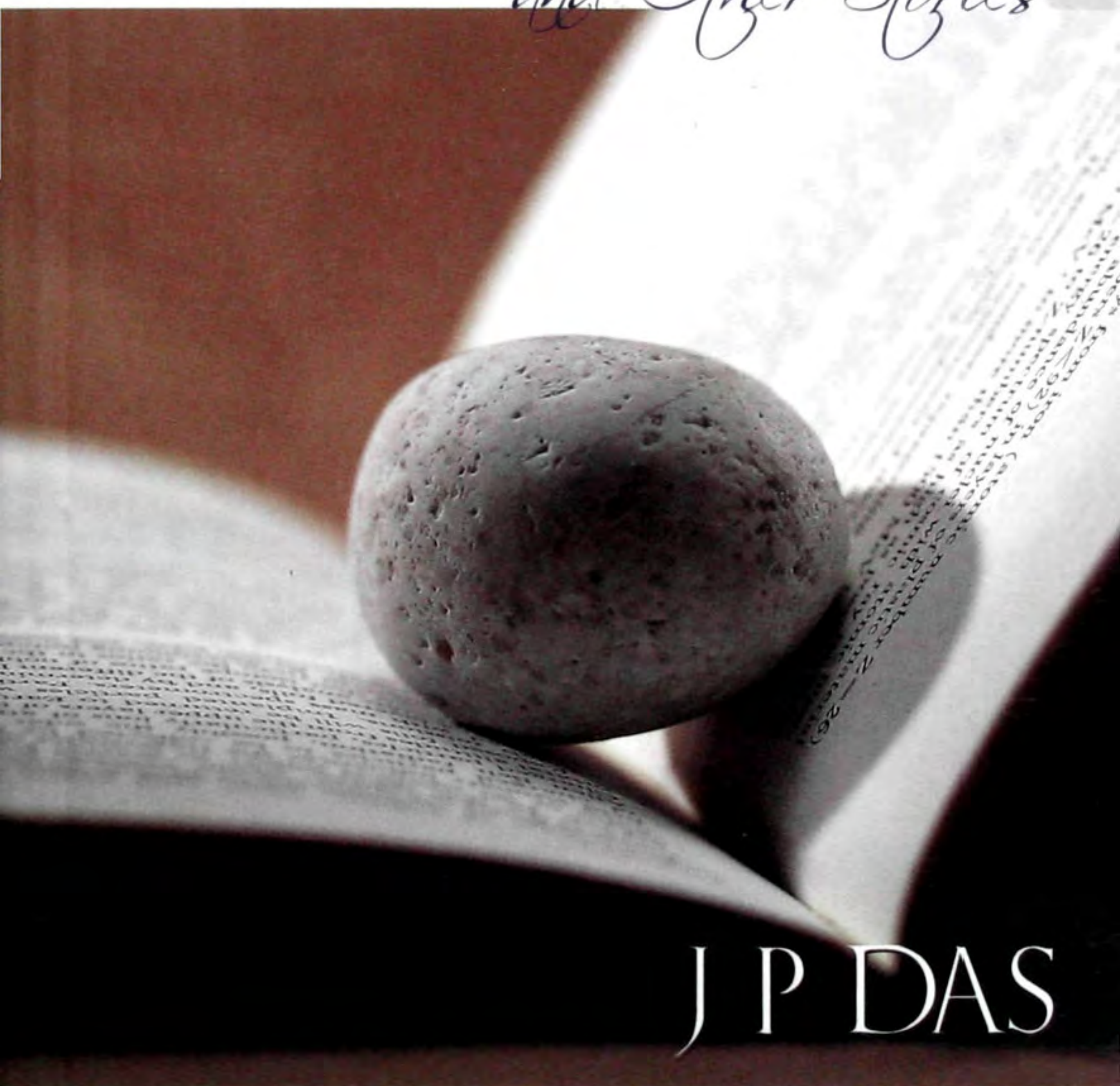
Dear Jester
and Other Stories



J P DAS

Translated from Oriya by Rabindra K. Swain and Paul St. Pierre

DEAR JESTER AND OTHER STORIES

J.P. Das

Translated from the Original Oriya
by
Rabindra K. Swain and Paul St-Pierre

Rupa . Co

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Introduction

States of Illusion

THE STORIES IN THIS COLLECTION DEPICT THE VARIOUS forms taken by the illusions which govern the lives and actions of human beings, and the price paid for this lack of lucidity, for the inability to comprehend the world in which we live. They are constructed around the tensions between the expectations and desires through which people define themselves and their inability to accept, or even admit, the remove at which these desires place them from the reality of the world, and from the expectations and desires of those with whom they are constantly in interaction. The world never corresponds precisely to our perceptions of it, and lives are lived under the sway of false beliefs. These are stories of such false beliefs, of mistaken identities, where in the end, for the most part, uncertainty and disillusionment prevail.

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The first story in the collection, "The Illusions of Success", recounts a chance meeting between Tarapad, a prominent writer and literary figure, and Sukhada, a former classmate who is now the State Minister of Education. Sukhada tells her story, while Tarapad imagines that their meeting will lead to a more intimate relationship. But the distance between them is great. As minister, Sukhada has tasted success and is able to acknowledge the difference between her life as seen through the eyes of others and the reality of what it represents for her, the price she has had to pay for what she has achieved. Tarapad, on the other hand, is unable to be honest to express his feelings, turning each of Sukhada's questions to him back to their source, revealing nothing of himself. His need to seduce can only lead to disappointment, whether it be accepting to address a meeting of students or an attempt to kindle romance with a former classmate. He is always left hoping for more, wondering what might have been and disappointed with what is.

This is followed by a story of a daughter's marriage, and the independence it brings her from her parents. Amaresh and Nandini have constantly determined all aspects of their daughter Bini's life, deciding she would study Science despite her desire to take Arts, turning down as unsuitable the boy she loves. When they set out to find her an acceptable husband, however, events take on a life of their own and inexorably escape their control. Through the marriage announcement sent to the newspaper they seal their own

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fate, for at that point Raybabu enters their lives. A well-liked and respected gentleman, Raybabu is looking for a wife for his son, Debasish, who lives in America. He decides that Bini is to be his son's bride and takes charge of the wedding arrangements. Amaresh is suspicious of Raybabu and his motives, but nevertheless welcomes his taking on of expenses which normally would be paid by the parents of the bride. Bini and Debasish are married, and Debasish returns to the United States, while his bride waits to obtain her visa. Amaresh and Nandini are afraid they have made the wrong choice for their daughter, that she is not happy in her new family, but they are unable to talk to her about it. When they see her off at the airport the distance between them has grown: they merely exchange banal pleasantries. Their attempt to control every aspect of Bini's life has only led to her distancing herself from them and to the realisation that they have not merited her trust.

In "The Inevitable", a professor's calm and ordered existence is disturbed by a face noticed in his classroom, a tongue stuck out, a smile—all belonging to one of his female students, a would-be poet. Poetry is both at the origin of their meeting and the occasion of their misunderstanding. Kabita is able to quote by heart lines written by Nandanandan in his youth. They have inspired her to become a writer, and she presents her work to her professor, asking for his advice. His thoroughness in correcting what she has written only annoys her, however; clearly, she is looking for something else. But what? Perhaps she does not

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herself know, and Nandanandan interprets her interest as more personal than it perhaps is. Feeling delight and happiness in their relation, he attempts to take her hand in his. Her angry reaction returns him to feelings of fear and rejection, until she brings him yet another poem. In their intertwined yet distinct desires, Nandanandan and Kabita play on each other's emotions, while at the same time experiencing frustration. Like a child, Nandanandan reacts to Kabita's every whim. The story ends on a note of helplessness: "Now he had no escape. He would be left dangling like a helpless puppet in her hands. Till death provided him with the ultimate release."

"The Intimate Stranger" tells the story of a love too perfect to have really existed, of the transformation of what had seemed to be the completely transparent lives and relationship of Ramanath and Seema into opacity and mistrust. Seema dies at the age of 49. She had apparently foreseen her death but gave no warning to Ramanath, thereby undermining his vision of her. Seema, he learns, had kept a part of her life hidden from him, and he interpets this as the sign of a lack of love on her part; indeed, it is the question of interpretation which is at the heart of the story. A hidden envelope, a few mysterious photographs, a note alluding to a rendezvous all feed Ramanath's imagination, as he attempts to understand and restore transparency to their lives. Seema is no longer the symbol of a perfect love but of occult forces masquerading as their opposite. The supernatural powers which had enabled her to see the truth

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are now interpreted as forces of evil; in his mind Seema, his love, has been transformed into a witch and Ramanath feels "that he had never known this woman at all."

The fifth story in the collection, "The Furlough", tells of a soldier's return home to his family after three years at the front. It is a story of both his expectations and the frustration he feels as his plans fall apart. His son, whom he has never seen, shies away from him; his mother is ill and requires care; his friends take him away from his responsibilities. In the end he has little time or opportunity to renew his relationship with his wife. At the end of the story he returns to his posting with nothing having been resolved, with none of his expectations, or those of his family, having been met.

"The Outsider" is a story of material and social success which undermines the very foundation on which it is built. It begins with Roma hoping that her husband, Debaraj, will return home late, for he has become an embarrassment to her. She wishes to protect her position as a cultural arbiter, a position which Debaraj himself has made possible through his encouragement and financial success. From humble beginnings the family has become progressively better off, but as this has been taking place Debaraj and Roma have grown further and further apart. Encouraged by her husband Roma began to write and became successful, but her new circle of friends are interested only in things literary and barely tolerate Debaraj's presence while at the same time benefiting freely from his generous hospitality. Debaraj had wanted Roma to be happy and to realise her potential,

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and his financial success has made this possible, but as she returns to her studies and takes up writing, the distance between them grows. The desire for Roma to have a full and satisfying life ends in the sacrifice of their relationship.

The following story, "Homeless", tells the story of Bibhu, an itinerant bookseller who spends his life selling his wares in trains. Moving from place to place he is constantly meeting new people, and temporarily linking his existence to theirs. His one relative, his sister, attempts to get him to settle down to a more normal sort of life in her village, but each time the possibility of some more permanent attachment comes into view he puts an immediate end to it. He is homeless by choice, and fiercely maintains his independence, frustrating those who look to him for commitment and reciprocity. As such, this story stands out from the others in this collection; Bibhu is lucid about the sort of life he wishes to lead and that in doing so he is going against the expectations of the society in which he lives.

"Radha" is also organised around the themes of reciprocity and independence. In her relationship with Sumit, she makes no claims on him; in this, she is the opposite of Sharada, the previous woman in his life, by whom he had felt imprisoned. Sharada had invaded all aspects of his life, and Sumit is afraid of becoming involved in another relationship for this reason. When, while travelling, he meets Radha, however, he is amazed at how easy their relationship is, at how free she leaves him. But the tables are turned when he asks her to marry him, and she

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tells him to never utter such words again. The independence which he is willing to at least partially forego comes back to haunt him when he is left with the knowledge, or at least the suspicion, that Radha will never belong to him alone. She is a goddess, and a goddess belongs to everyone, he concludes.

In "The Homecoming" desire waxes and wanes according to whether it meets with opposition. Trivikram lives in Delhi but speaks constantly of going back to Kalahandi in Orissa. His life up until retirement had been characterised by the contradictory urge of needing to move on and of wanting to settle down, and they resurface in this longing to return home. His friend Ramaswamy's negative comments about what life must now be like in Kalahandi, without the comforts of Delhi, serve only to reinforce his desire. His situation is mirrored by that of an American girl coming to India to find her roots, only to experience a series of misadventures and end up with very negative views about what she had found 'back home'. When the opportunity arises to sell his house in Delhi to Ramaswamy, making the move back to Kalahandi a real possibility, the project he had caressed for so long in his mind becomes much more doubtful. As with the American girl the desire to return to one's origins is shown to be impossible, since neither home nor oneself are any longer as they exist in memory and the imagination.

In the next story, "The Bystander", a busload of journalists are on their way to a city where rioting had broken out a few days previously. The government makes all the

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arrangements for the trip, and does everything to ensure they are as comfortable as possible, with lots to eat and drink. Among the journalists is Sambit, who sets himself off from the others—again the theme of independence—through his sense that he is somehow different from the others and cannot be 'bought'. While the others' interest is primarily in what they are being given to eat and drink, Sambit reflects on the role and the duty of journalists. But he, like the others, is forced into compromise, and his purity is put into question by his weakness, leading in the end to his downfall. From his hotel room he sees a man being assaulted by two policemen but fails to do anything to stop the beating. Haunted by this memory and by his own cowardice, he returns to the city, finds the policemen and tries to discover what had become of the man. The scene plays out once again—or is it for the very first time?—and the man being beaten, the man he saw being beaten and who he did nothing to save, is Sambit himself!

In the next to last story in the collection, "The Ultimatum", two former chief ministers of the State, Bireshwar and Srihari, find themselves in the same prison because of their opposition to the attempt by the government to restrict the freedom of the press. There they suffer a series of indignities, the greatest of which for Bireshwar is the fact that he finds himself in the same jail as his lower-caste colleague. More difficulties follow, and they increase when the two lodge a complaint concerning the conditions under which they are being held. They are harassed more

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and more, in particular by one guard, Bhikari, who delights in imagining ways to make their prison stay as uncomfortable as possible. Bireshwar and Srihari decide to teach Bhikari a lesson, and renew their pressure on the government. In the end they have but one demand: not that the press bill be rescinded, but that their guard be transferred to a different prison. Their principles have been reduced to mere questions of their own comfort.

The final story, "Dear Jester", focuses on the relation of the writer to his characters, to the process of writing, and to his own existence in the real world. As the story is written it escapes the writer's control, as does his own life when it comes under his scrutiny as a writer. The two worlds—reality and the world of the imagination—coexist but never exactly correspond, a connection and distance marked in the title's transformations of the epithet used by a friend of the writer—"Saala joker"—into "Dear Jester". The writer is ever conscious of this transformation to be carried out, a transformation which, to give the illusion of reality and of truth, must take its distance from them.

The stories in this volume have as a common thread the confrontation of reality and illusion, with the feelings of disappointment, frustration, and even, at times, acceptance which ensue. With an eye to revealing the true nature of the relationship connecting the characters in these stories, *Dear Jester* strips away their illusions. The confrontation with reality brings some to doubt their previous existence,

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whereas others remain blissfully unchanged, having learned little—less in any case than the reader has—from the experience. For in the end the revelation comes through the writing and the reading of the stories; the real lies in the literary transformation of reality, in the creation of an 'illusion' of reality.

PAUL ST-PIERRE

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The Illusions of Success

TARAPAD HAD VOWED THAT NEVER AGAIN WOULD HE attend such meetings, but then an invitation had arrived and once more he had let himself be tempted. Now, alone on the dais facing the empty rows of chairs, he felt bored. All the lights, other than the one above his head, had been switched off. He asked the student he was holding hostage to take a seat, afraid that otherwise he might leave, while he himself moved to the more comfortable chair reserved for the person presiding over the meeting. It had ended more than half-an-hour ago, but the car had still not arrived.

This was what always happened. Taken in by the flattering words of students from colleges out in the rural areas, he would agree to attend their annual function. He knew they were exaggerating when they said who the other guests would be and what arrangements had been made, but when they told him people were looking forward to hearing him speak he simply could not hold out any longer. Once the

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invitation cards had been printed, it was too late to back down. This was how it always happened, and this time had once again been no exception.

The dilapidated taxi finally arrived, an hour late. Tarapad had been ready on time, and his exasperation showed. But instead of apologising, the driver simply said, "Please hurry up, sir. The road is bad." Tarapad had expected a college student to accompany him, but instead there was a letter explaining that everyone was busy arranging the meeting—nobody was able to come but could he please arrive on time. In the three-line letter Tarapad noticed four mistakes. Rolling the paper into a ball, he threw it on the ground and got into the taxi.

The road was indeed bad and, not surprisingly, the car broke down half way there. From experience, Tarapad knew that taxis always break down when the sun is at its hottest and where there is no shade. When he was younger he would get upset, but he had learned to accept such situations philosophically. Fanning himself with a newspaper and covering his head with a handkerchief, he got out of the car and waited dispassionately for it to be repaired. All the while, the driver was cursing the vehicle and its owner up and down, as he tried to fix it, even stopping passing cars to ask their drivers for help. It took some time before the rebellious car finally yielded to his efforts.

Tarapad was not worried about arriving on time; he knew that these meetings never started on schedule. Indeed, there were only a few people in the hall when he arrived; everyone

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else was out by the road waiting to greet the minister. Finding the student who had invited him, Tarapad asked if there a toilet or a shady spot nearby, and second, if he could have some drinking water before making his speech. He also insisted that the car should be ready when the meeting was over.

Why attend such meetings, he asked himself. To hear the sound of my own voice? To reassure myself that my reputation and popularity are as strong as ever? To enjoy the feeling of holding an audience under my spell? To hear the sweet sound of applause in response to a carefully prepared and rehearsed speech? For all these reasons perhaps, but was there something more?

He had no doubts about his importance within the field of literature; some even called him the 'high priest' of the literary establishment, a term he secretly relished. He had numerous prizes and distinctions to his credit; both his creative and his critical works had been well received; he was on the boards of different literary institutions; he received invitations from abroad; various organisations vied with each other to honour him. Why then, he wondered, despite all this, did he attend such unimportant meetings?

He was satisfied with the way his speech had gone this evening. He had been introduced in quite a flattering way. In the past he had heard the person presenting him get the titles of his books wrong, and fail to mention his awards and degrees. So now whenever he was invited to a meeting, he would provide the organisers with a complete printed

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résumé beforehand, so there would be no mistakes. To his delight, this evening the person introducing him had even embellished on and exaggerated his achievements.

The added attraction of the meeting was the presence of the education minister. There had been a time when Tarapad, being a college teacher himself, would show due respect and deference to the education minister, but now that he was a famous writer, he treated the minister as an equal. All the more so since the present minister was a former classmate. So, when they met again this time he maintained a certain reserve, making no move to introduce himself. During the four years at college, Sukhada had been a serious girl without many friends. As far as he could remember, he had spoken to her only three or four times. And even if he had had no occasion to meet her since, he knew of her success in politics and had chosen to keep a certain distance. He did not want people to think he was trying to ingratiate himself to a powerful politician.

Now Tarapad was sorry he had not alluded to the fact they knew each other; it was Sukhada who first mentioned it to the audience. Speaking on the evening's theme—social justice in literature—she began her speech, "If society really was just, then it would be the eminent educator and writer sitting next to me, rather than myself, who would be the minister of education. This illustrious person, I'm proud to say, is none other than my classmate Tarapad."

Tarapad felt ashamed. He hoped to make up for his aloofness by speaking to her after the meeting, but Sukhada

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was surrounded by well-wishers and there was no chance to talk to her before she got into her car. Meanwhile, a student came to tell him that his car was being repaired.

He glanced at his watch. Barely controlling his anger and irritation, he asked when it would be ready. Telling him to be seated, the student said he would go and find out. But not wanting to be left alone, Tarapad accompanied the student to see how the repairs were progressing.

The car was being fixed a short distance from the college, near the dak bungalow, where the minister was staying. People had gathered there, and the other drivers were helping with the repairs. Noticing Tarapad, the student leader told him, "The car will be ready in a few minutes." When Tarapad looked at his watch, he added, "We won't let you leave until the car has been repaired. Instead, sir, let's go to the bungalow so that you can rest." Tarapad did not want to join the crowd of people seeking favours from the minister, but went inside and took a seat on the opposite side of the room from where the minister was sitting. She must have seen him, for her young private secretary came over and asked him to move over to her side. Tarapad accepted to do so and took a chair opposite the minister. With all the people surrounding her, and their complaints, grievances and requests for recommendations, Sukhada did not get a chance to talk to him. At last she stood up and saying she had some urgent work to do, asked them to come back the following morning. The private secretary finally managed to get them to leave.

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"I wanted to speak to you after the meeting," Sukhada told Tarapad, "but couldn't because of the crowd. I'm glad you're here; at least we can have a couple of minutes to ourselves." But that was not possible either, as the secretary arrived carrying files. Sukhada told him to keep them for later, but he asked her to attend to at least one, since there was someone waiting to take it back. And so of course she did.

Silently observing Sukhada, Tarapad thought, what a strange life she leads! People like her have no chance to be themselves, even for a moment; their celebrity and influence condemn them to a life constantly in the spotlight. Looking up from the file, Sukhada said, "Just give me a minute. We'll be able to talk as soon as I finish." Asking for tea, she mused, almost echoing Tarapad's very thoughts, "Not a moment to oneself."

Tea came. Signing the file, Sukhada told the secretary to take the others away. Somewhat reluctantly, he left. Now Tarapad and Sukhada sat facing each other, tea cups in hand. Referring to the thirty years that had passed, she remarked, "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

Tarapad now had a chance to take a closer look at her. On the dais and in the middle of a crowd, she represented power and position. Away from the city, sitting on the verandah of the bungalow in the growing darkness, she was once again the young girl of thirty years before. In the woman with gray hair and a face threatened with wrinkles, Tarapad could see the fresh but quiet and shy college girl who had

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been his classmate. She was still attractive, despite her age, as if time had brought with it an easy and effortless beauty. Suddenly Tarapad became conscious that Sukhada was still looking at him, waiting for an answer. Embarrassed, he said, "Yes, and to meet in such a strange place!"

Both of them fell silent. Romantic ideas played through Tarapad's mind. Trying to take control of the situation, he said, "Do you remember...." But before he could continue, the student leader arrived to tell him the car was ready. Pulling up a chair, the student sat down next to Sukhada and started talking local politics. The next sip of tea left a bitter taste in Tarapad's mouth, and he put the cup on the ground.

It was time for him to leave. Once again, everything was formal and distant. "I have to travel a long distance; see you again," said Tarapad. Sukhada complimented him, "You're such a busy person. I was lucky to meet up with you." The student leader chipped in, "Any time you wish, I can arrange a meeting and have him come." After the parting formalities, Tarapad left the verandah, leaving behind Sukhada and all his fantasies.

Suddenly a storm rose out of nowhere. Swirls of dust and dry leaves filled the air, and the trees began to shake. The people crowding around the bungalow ran for cover; the secretary desperately clutched his files. Afraid Tarapad would not leave, and that he would have to continue to look after him, the student leader tried to rush him, "Sir, please, get into the car." But the dust storm was followed

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by heavy rain, and Tarapad was forced back on to the verandah. Together with the student leader, he rejoined Sukhada. "Fate is against you—you won't get back on time," she remarked.

There was a long silence. Watching the rain, everyone seemed lost in thought. To Tarapad it appeared his fate was to spend more time with Sukhada. But time was now completely under the spell of nature; any sound would have disrupted the divine rhythm of the silence—an inexplicable peace suffused Tarapad's mind. He felt he knew Sukhada intimately; he imagined theirs was a relationship transcending time, a unique relationship. Only time can create in someone's mind such a transcendental memory of things that never happened, and Tarapad surrendered himself to the nostalgic embrace of the imagined memories.

Once again the secretary, who seemed to live only for his files, destroyed the serenity of the moment. He stood close to the minister's chair, his hands full of papers. "Madam," he said, "there are more important papers to be signed." Looking at him with more than a hint of ridicule in her eyes, Sukhada replied, "Sit down and enjoy the rain for a few minutes." Venkat took a seat, but immersed himself in the files, remarking, almost as an afterthought, "The rain will be good for the crops." Once again silence enveloped them. With no sign of the rain letting up, the student leader got up to leave. "I'll give the driver instructions; there won't be any problem," he said. Tarapad's first impulse was to ask him not to leave until he was safe and sound in the car,

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but he did not say a word, realising he wanted to be left alone with Sukhada.

Tarapad had a lot to talk about, and so too did Sukhada perhaps, but the man with the files was like a wall between them. Finally it was Sukhada who solved the problem. "I won't sign any more papers tonight," she told Venkat. "Keep them for tomorrow morning." When he did not budge, she added, "Now go and get some rest." Reluctantly, the secretary got up and went to the other end of the verandah, where he could keep an eye on them and perhaps even overhear their conversation.

The sudden rain had completely changed the mood. Tarapad could no longer say, "Remember, Sukhada … ." Now, it seemed, their conversation could not continue on a personal note; they could only talk about the falling rain. Once again Sukhada broke the ice, "I've read all your books," she said. Nothing pleases an author more than when people say they have read what he has written. Tarapad thought she would go on to talk about one book in particular or say something about his writing in general, but instead she asked him, "You're the most popular writer today, aren't you?" "Popularity," replied Tarapad, "has nothing to do with how good the writing is. Did you like my books?"

"If I tell you I like your work, that wouldn't mean much. Of course, it's also true that if I didn't like your books I wouldn't have read them! Or maybe I would have read them just because the author was a former classmate."

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In a different place or a different situation Tarapad would have been cross with her, but in this mysterious watery world of rain Sukhada had appeared from out of his past and was talking to him honestly and directly. His mood was expansive, and he realised that at such times one can only analyse oneself.

"You're right," he said. "A question like that can only be answered vaguely, using a word like 'good'. There's no point asking such a question. To judge a writer's merit, one has first of all to decide what yardstick to use."

"What do *you* think of your writing?"

"Now you've got me cornered; I'd have to think long and hard about that."

Turning to look at Sukhada, he saw she was smiling. All his literary achievements somehow seemed ephemeral and meaningless. Everything was a lie: all his awards, certificates, honours, achievements, and applause—everything. The only truth was the rain and his being there with Sukhada.

Suddenly the lights went out. Tarapad felt like reaching out and touching Sukhada in the dark, going to a world where literature, politics, and ministerships no longer exist, where there's nothing but rain. He felt a fleeting touch in the darkness. Standing next to him, the secretary was saying in his obsequious manner, "I'll bring a lamp in a minute."

The lamp was brought in, and Venkat joined in in their conversation, which took a turn towards things of no consequence. It was decided that Tarapad would have dinner and then leave once the rain had stopped. When the secretary left to make the arrangements Tarapad told

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Sukhada, "He's not willing to leave you on your own." "I know," she replied. "Secretaries are like jealous wives, watching their husbands' every step. He has to know everything—who I've talked to, what I've done, what's going on at home, ..."

Proving her words true, Venkat hurried back a few minutes later, as if afraid that something important might have happened in his absence. "Madam, everything's been arranged." "That's fine," she replied, and asked him to leave. She exchanged knowing looks with Tarapad, but Venkat did not realise they were making fun of him.

"We were talking about your writing," continued Sukhada. "Your speech was very interesting. I learnt a lot, things I'll be able to use in my own speeches." Tarapad returned the compliment, "Yours too was full of wisdom, not something generally expected from a politician." Sukhada smiled, "Oh, my speech ... . If you'd heard some of mine you'd know that I keep on repeating the same things, over and over again, with only a change here and there. Where would I find the time to read books and learn new things? But for you it's different."

Tarapad thought of saying that to make a speech he had to refer to a wide range of books, both Indian and foreign, and take elaborate notes. He might have told this lie; but how could he in a situation like this, sitting with his friend who was speaking so candidly, and on such a rainy evening. Instead he said, "It's not really true that it's different. Writers also often repeat themselves in their speeches. And as for

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reading books, we don't read that many. What we usually do is read some foreign newspaper or magazine, and make a show of our knowledge based on that. That's what our wisdom consists in. You might think that what I said at the meeting is based on thorough research. In fact, it didn't take me more than five minutes to prepare. It was a rehash of what I've written or said many times before."

"But your creative writing is your own." Tarapad gave her a blank look. She seemed determined to gain access to his very soul. But how could he allow his literary persona, constructed over the years with such devotion and design, to crumble? How could he throw away fame, recognition and personal popularity? Why should he be forced to choose between lying or cutting a sorry figure? The only way out was to counter her questions with his own. "First, tell me about yourself," he said.

"What do you want to know? If you want me to tell you about my life since college, the short answer is: I had to give up my studies when I got married in my final year; I took care of the children and household chores for ten years and then went into politics; I was elected to the Assembly and after being a minister of state, I'm now a cabinet minister. Seen from the outside, my life has been a success, simple and without complications."

"You have a good reputation as a minister."

"Yes, I know. In order to survive in politics, you need to understand what people think of you. You can't be in politics unless you know your own limits. Do you think the Chief

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Minister promoted me to the rank of cabinet minister out of pity? He didn't have any choice, because at that time ...—you see, I'm letting you in on the machinations within our party."

"Of all our contemporaries you've done the best."

"Since I entered politics late I'm not unhappy with what I've achieved. And though everything is possible in politics, I'm not reaching for greater heights."

"You've got so much already."

"Yes, I have to admit that I have power, fame, social recognition, happiness at home, affluence—everything. There're always a lot of people at my door, seeking my favour. They're eager to see me, to hear me speak. So many organisations, so many projects, so many people, all dependent on me. When I see them I think: poor them. In comparision, how lucky I am! I have everything!"

Both of them fell silent for some time. The electricity was still off, and someone came and pumped up the dying lamp. The rain showed no sign of letting up. The bungalow was quiet and still; even Venkat kept his eyes fixed on the rain. Suddenly a gust of wind splattered some on the verandah. Venkat came over and moved the lamp. Taking the opportunity, Sukhada said, "Take the lamp in to the room. We'll go inside." With a great deal of hesitation, Venkat showed them to the room and left. Now they were out of his sight. Looking at her, Tarapad joked, "Poor Venkat has to suffer separation now!"

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Sukhada did not say anything; not even the slightest smile played across her face. She had grown serious. Picking up where the conversation had left off, she continued, "Sometimes I think that everything I have is meaningless. Have you ever felt like that?"

Tarapad tried to remember. He had not consciously given it much thought, yet he could not say that he had not felt that way. It was true that he had written a number of books, but how lasting were they? Were they original enough to stand the test of time? His writings were only clever imitations of foreign works, though nobody seemed to realise that. His so-called 'profound' creations were culled from the works of lesser-known writers. His works were clever cut-and-paste jobs. His readers and critics were not aware of this, but how could he himself pretend otherwise? And if he did not say so now, would he ever have another opportunity to admit the naked truth? Somehow he could not bring himself to express his weakness to someone he might never meet again. Instead of answering Sukhada's question, he asked, "Why do you sometimes feel like that?"

"The answer is quite simple," said Sukhada. "The truth is that in fact I have nothing, though I think I have everything. Did I ever plan to lead such a life? Nobody knows what led me to enter politics. My husband was having problems in his job. He decided that if I could reach the people in power it would help his career. I wasn't interested in politics. I was young but I knew what kind of men politicians were, and what they wanted from me. Still, my

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husband persuaded me to to run after them. Gradually, I learnt what was good and what was bad, and I grew more confident. I knew who should be allowed closer and by how much, who should be kept at a distance, how much I should surrender to whom and why. It became like a game and I began to enjoy it. I climbed the political ladder. It reached the point where my husband, who had forced me to enter politics, began to oppose my political career and gave up the job which had made me go into politics in the first place. What lesson do you draw from all this?"

After a pause, Sukhada answered her own question, "Whether I wanted it or not, this life with its twists and turns is my own, and I have to live it. What's the use of saying now that I did not want to live like this? What certainty is there that I would have lived the way I wanted to. In other words, did I really know what sort of life was best for me? It's easy to look back at the past, but could I have imagined then what the future would bring?"

After listening to her, Tarapad thought that he too should tell her about his successes and failures, and lift the weight from his mind. He looked at her. She seemed to be in another world; as if everything she had said about herself had not been meant for Tarapad, but had been a soliloquy, meant only for herself. Turning to Tarapad, she seemed to come back to the present. She smiled and said, " Now let's have your confession." While he was thinking of how to begin, the lights came back on. The kerosene lamp, bright until then, suddenly seemed dim and faded into the

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background. And everything that had been hidden from sight and consciousness—the rooms of the bungalow, the verandah, the people, Venkat—reappeared. Tarapad did not say anything and Venkat announced that dinner was ready.

The dinner was routine, but pleasant and entertaining, thanks to the presence of Venkat. Sukhada was quite at ease, her behaviour suiting a minister. Nothing betrayed the very personal conversation they had had minutes earlier. Tarapad thought that once dinner was over, they would go back to the intimate moments they had shared on the verandah, that he would be able to tell her about everything on his mind. But that is not what happened. After dinner, when they came back out on to the verandah, the rain had stopped and the moon was faintly visible. The driver was ready with the car. From his notebook Venkat was reading out the minister's programme for the following day.

After saying goodbye to Sukhada, Tarapad got into the car. There were so many things he had not been able to say. Had their farewell been a bit more personal, he would have been happy. Everything seemed incomplete. The driver was in a happy mood and said, "Now the car won't give us any trouble." Not wanting to start up a conversation, Tarapad kept silent and began to think about the evening's events. The accidental meeting with Sukhada boded well. He would arrange another, and when they met he would try to strike up a relationship with a tinge of romance. He allowed his imagination to run wild. The latest scandal in the city was

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the affair between Tarapad and Sukhada. Romance between an established writer and a minister would be grist to the rumour mill. But the next moment it seemed to him that no such thing would ever happen. He would not meet Sukhada again just as he had not met her for a long time. Even if they met some ten years later, they would have grown old. Maybe his car would not be out of order, and there would not be a bungalow close by; the weather would not be unfavourable, and there would be a more curious Venkat. He tried to forcefully drive these unpleasant thoughts from his mind and, closing his eyes, began to concentrate on his literary success. All the awards he had not yet received came to his mind. The ambitious work he had embarked upon occupied his thoughts. He thought of the festschrift to be published on his sixtieth birthday. This reminded him of his sworn enemies. He imagined a clever critic revealing all the sources he had plagiarised from, destroying his reputation. He felt as if he had been dragged off a dais and carelessly thrown into the gutter.

Tarapad reprimanded himself for harbouring such negative thoughts; he scolded himself for having come to such a college in a far off village. He decided, although he knew his decision would never be absolutely final, that he would never again accept such an invitation. Then he surrendered himself completely to the car as it bumped along the rough road.

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Our Daughter's Happiness

EARLY THAT MORNING AMARESH HAD SAID TO HIS WIFE, "The old man just called." Nandini knew who Amaresh meant but still asked, "Who? What old man?" "Who else but Ray Babu. Who else would ring up so early and wake us up?" "Why are you always so critical of the poor man? We're lucky to have him for a friend. And, as for being an 'old man,' what do you think you are? He's only a couple of years older than you, at the most. Why did he call?"

Everything Nandini said was true. Ray Babu was probably not more than four or five years older than Amaresh, yet Amaresh considered himself middle-aged and Ray Babu, old. Amaresh knew, of course, that he was being unfair. Everyone agreed that Ray Babu was a good soul. All Amaresh's relatives and friends were lavish in their praise of his quiet, dignified and humble nature. And in fact Amaresh had no reason to disagree with them, but for some reason he was still suspicious. He would think to himself,

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there can't be another Mahatma Gandhi in our day and age!

Getting no answer, Nandini asked Amaresh again, "Why did Ray Babu ring up?" "He's threatening to come over this afternoon," replied Amaresh. "Didn't you ask him to join us for lunch?" "No, it's he who was inviting us for lunch, but I declined. How often can we eat at his place? Anyway he has agreed to come here."

Amaresh knew that Nandini would now start praising Ray Babu to the skies and be at it for at least five minutes. So he left saying he had work to do. Although he had retired and was not particularly busy, he preferred going back over the stale news in the newspaper to having to listen to lavish praise for Ray Babu, all of which indirectly drew attention to his own deficiencies.

No, Amaresh had no reason to be disagreeable or distant with Ray Babu. In fact, he should have been grateful to him. In accepting Bini, their daughter, as his son's bride, not only had Ray Babu not asked for any dowry but he had also spared Amaresh a great deal of expense. At a certain stage in the wedding preparations, Ray Babu had taken on responsibility for everything. Although Amaresh had happily agreed with Ray Babu's efforts to cut back on expenditures—finding a less expensive caterer, paring down the guest list, etc.—he had not appreciated Ray Babu's interference in the arrangements. However, with his help, Bini's wedding had gone off smoothly and with a minimum of expense.

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Bini was their only child and Amaresh and Nandini often told themselves she was all they had. Who else was their money and their house for? They wanted Bini to be happy in her marriage. Even when Bini was a child, the couple wanted her to be happy. But of course their idea of happiness was different from hers. They would decide which dress looked better on her, which toy was right for her, which food she would enjoy, all irrespective of her own likes or dislikes. When she was a child, they had managed to impose their will, though sometimes she would break into tears. But as she grew up, she argued with them about these things. They had one trump card they would invariably play: "You're only a child, you don't know. Whatever we're doing, we're doing for your own good."

Bini passed her matriculation enveloped in the overwhelming love and concern of her parents. She wanted to study Arts, but they forced her into Science. Amaresh and Nandini admitted to themselves that this decision was somewhat selfish. As they were often ill, they wanted her to become a doctor. After all, how many people can say they have a doctor in the family on call twenty-four hours a day? When they persuaded Bini to study Science they did not make their intentions clear, but Bini knew full well what they were up to. She had to study Science, but luckily for her she received such low marks that she could not get admitted to medical college. Her parents scolded her, saying how much they had sacrificed to make her happy, and finally told her that from then on she should make her own decisions.

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Bini changed from Science to Arts and her parents once again did their best to make sure she was happy. Now that she could not be a doctor and take care of them, their concern was that she be happy when she got married. They were a bit sad that she now paid them less attention; instead, she spent her time either with her friends or on her studies and music. It was as if she had become a different person. There had been a time when Bini was always at their beck and call. If they felt like amusing themselves they would call her and play with her until they felt bored. Whenever guests came, they would ask her to recite all the lessons and rhymes she had learned. If somebody arrived when they were playing with Bini, they would ask her to go inside immediately and she would silently do as she was told. As she grew up though, all this changed. Amaresh and Nandini always harked back to the days when Bini had been their ideal child, when she had obeyed them completely, when she had not argued with them, when she had been totally dependent on them.

As for marriage, they had thought that, like her friends, she would choose her own partner. This was a sign not so much of a liberal outlook as of Amaresh's inadequacy in finding a bridegroom. Besides, they thought that if she chose her own partner they would not have to supply a dowry. Although they had not discussed this with her, they felt she would soon fall in love. Finally, it did happen. Her silence at home, her lack of interest in anything else, her mood swings—sometimes happy, at other times sad—led Nandini

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to believe that Bini had fallen in love, but she could not guess who the boy was.

The year Amaresh retired, Bini completed her M.A. As they were becoming worried about her marriage, they forced her to reveal the name of the boy she liked. If they could have, they would have told her to which caste and which class the boy should belong. But that is not how things happen in love. The boy was not from the same caste; his family was poor and his complexion dark. From the day she introduced him to them, dissatisfaction and disagreement ensued. Bini was bitterly criticised for such a poor choice, as compared to so-and-so's daughter, who, in such-and-such a circumstance had chosen the right, good-looking upper-caste boy. They complained that she lacked common sense, intelligence, etc. But Bini was stubborn, and refused to give in to her parents' pressure.

Realising that scolding was not working the parents resorted to tears. Nandini reminded her how she had carried her for nine months and Amaresh recounted all his trouble and sacrifices for her. She was told how Nandini had watched over her when she was sick, how Amaresh had done everything he could to get her admitted to a good school and how much they had cried when she had fallen from the verandah and broken her arm. In all of this there was one recurring theme: that parents always know what's best for their child.

Finally it was Bini who gave in. Once she had said 'yes' the smiles returned to her parents' faces, regardless of how she herself felt. Nandini consoled Bini, "You've been spared

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a lifetime of suffering. Wait and see how we arrange your marriage."

Finding a boy for her was easier said than done. They sought the help of relatives, but to no avail. Those who had criticised her and given advice to her parents when she had been in love were no longer anywhere to be seen. Instead, they told Amaresh that it was difficult to find a boy for her since people knew she had fallen in love with someone else. And those who claimed to be friends of the family explained away their inability to find a suitable boy by saying that Bini had a dark complexion. Someone suggested they should put a matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper.

There were seventeen responses to their advertisement describing a girl, M.A., 155 cm, slim, average complexion, of Kayastha caste and Mahishya gotra. Nandini and Amaresh went through the proposals excitedly. There were eight boys with the name Devashish. Weighing the pros and cons of all the letters—such as handwriting, grammatical errors, length, etc.—Amaresh rejected four and made a comparative study of the brief and highly suspect accounts of themselves given by the others. The task seemed insurmountable, since such disparate elements as monthly salary, height, place of posting, status of the family had all to be factored into the equation. If at one moment he liked the scientist in America, then at another it seemed the bank employee in Bombay was better. It was while Amaresh and Nandini were trying to reach a decision that Ray Babu appeared out of the blue and solved their problem.

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One fine morning a well-dressed older man entered their drawing room, loudly asking if Amaresh Babu was home. Before Amaresh could answer, the visitor sat down on the sofa and said, "I apologise for disturbing you like this. Still, as your neighbour I think I may be allowed such liberties." Amaresh wasn't wearing a shirt and wanted to go and put one on. Realising Amaresh felt awkward, the gentleman said, "Please don't bother to get dressed, I'll leave in two minutes after having had a cup of tea with you." When Amaresh sat down, feeling a little irritated, the gentleman introduced himself, "I'm T.K. Ray. I live nearby. I retired as a professor five years ago. I know that you've also retired, and so I thought, 'Let me come and spend some time with you.'" Then Ray Babu started discussing current affairs in the newspapers. Although the uninvited visitor's idle talk made Amaresh feel restless, out of politeness he went to ask Nandini to make some tea. She had been listening to everything and wondered why Amaresh was showing so much hospitality to someone who was a complete stranger. The man who had said he would sit for only two minutes stayed a full forty-five. Although Amaresh learned nothing of the gentleman during their chat, Ray Babu, through his pointed questions, was able to gather all the information he wanted about Amaresh. Even after Ray Babu had left Amaresh could not figure out why he had come. Nandini scolded him saying the man might be a cheat, a rascal, a thief or even a dacoit. However hard Amaresh tried to convince Nandini that the man lived nearby and that he

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had given him his full address and telephone number, she was not ready to believe him. Still, Amaresh had no clues as to what the man really wanted. He even thought of calling him up to find out.

Before he could do this, the phone rang. In a soft voice, Ray Babu said, "This morning I committed a great blunder. Being a talkative man, I forgot to tell you the purpose of my visit." Amaresh asked a bit hoarsely, "What purpose?" "Such matters can't be discussed over the telephone. I'll have to come to your place again. Will you be there this evening?" "I'm not sure. Tell me what your purpose is." "I went to see your daughter but left without having done so." When Amaresh told Nandini, who was standing beside him, she asked him to invite Ray Babu to their place that evening. Once Amaresh had put down the receiver, Nandini said, "Don't you understand? He came to see our daughter for his son." After that Nandini got busy getting ready to receive Ray Babu in the evening.

By the time Ray Babu arrived, everything was ready: the drawing room had been tidied, there were flowers in a vase, Amaresh had put on a clean shirt and Nandini was dressed up as if she were going out. Arrangements for tea had been made and Bini had been asked to be suitably dressed. Ray Babu arrived on time. After they had received him, Ray Babu said, "Please forgive me for coming over this morning. It wasn't the proper thing to do. And once I was here, I should have immediately told you why I'd come." He went on to explain. The circulation manager for the paper to

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which Amaresh had given the matrimonial advertisement was Ray Babu's friend, and Ray Babu had got Amaresh's address from him. Amaresh was not pleased and it could be seen on his face. But Nandini said, "You did the right thing. You saved the time that would have been spent on corresponding back and forth."

Within no time, things became more relaxed and Ray Babu, with the active support of Nandini, began to behave like an old friend of the family. Amaresh secretly hoped that once Bini met the gentleman she would disapprove of him, but Ray Babu won Bini over too and she took to him very easily. This both saddened Amaresh and made him angry, since lately Bini had been less free and open with him. When, after some time, Bini showed signs of getting up, Nandini looked at her and said, "Why are you in such a hurry? You've nothing else to do." But Ray Babu said, "Why force her to stay here? She's young; let her do her own things. Why should she stay here and be bored with us?"

After Ray Babu left, Nandini and Amaresh discussed what had happened. Nandini said, "Why waste time? Let's tell him 'yes'." Amaresh became irritated. Nandini always behaved like that; when she went out shopping, she would say about the first thing she saw, "This will do; let's buy it." Amaresh said, "We should look at all the letters we've received." "While you're busy choosing," replied Nandini, "this nice boy will slip through our fingers." "How do you know this one is the right one?" "Ray Babu is such a nice man," she answered, "his son must be good too. Instead of

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our going to his place, he has come to ours. How many people would do that? Where else can we find a boy working in America and, what's more, without having to provide a dowry." "In such matters," said Amaresh, "we shouldn't be in a hurry. First of all, I'm suspicious of this Ray Babu. Who's ever heard of a man coming to the girl's house after secretly obtaining information from the office of the newspaper. Nor should we be taken in by someone who is such a smooth talker. That aside, what do we know about the boy, who has been in America for ten years? He must be quite old. Not only that, but one can't be sure that he hasn't been married already in America."

This last remark silenced Nandini. She knew of two or three cases where after the boys went back to America with their brides it became known that they had earlier been married to white women. And so Nandini said, "Find out what you can about Ray Babu."

Amaresh learned to his surprise that Ray Babu was well-known in the neighbourhood and that everyone had a high opinion of him. Some even suggested that Amaresh should immediately agree to the proposal blindfolded. He asked everybody about Ray Babu's son, but nobody knew anything about Ray Babu's family or children. Nobody knew how old the son was or what he did, but they all agreed that Amaresh should marry off his daughter to him.

Ray Babu now began frequenting Amaresh's house, and took over responsibility for Bini's wedding, behaving as if the marriage had been settled and only the arrangements

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needed to be made. In due course, Amaresh learned more about Ray Babu. He was a widower and Tutlu, or Devashish, was his only child. The son was a quiet boy, with a good job in America. If Bini was to marry him, she would no doubt be happily settled. But Amaresh could not bring himself to like the middle-aged, ruffian-like man he saw in a photograph Ray Babu had given him. Nandini too was taken aback but, afraid that Amaresh might create problems, tried to diffuse the situation by asking, "Is it possible to really know what somebody looks like from a photograph?" Amaresh was about to say something when she added, "After all, our daughter is not such a beauty herself."

Now Ray Babu, sitting in Amaresh's house, was drawing up a list of things to be done for the wedding. At first, Amaresh was not happy with this, but when he saw that Ray Babu was prepared to pay most of the expenses and cut back expenses for other things, he resigned himself to it and even welcomed the interference. Within days Ray Babu had arranged everything; on which day Tutlu would arrive, where the marriage ceremony would be held, how many guests would be invited, how expenses could be reduced, etc.

The other aspect which pleased Amaresh and Nandini was that Bini had accepted Ray Babu. They credited themselves with saving Bini from a terrible fate. Nandini kept on enumerating Bini's misfortunes had she married the boy of her choice, comparing them with her life once she had married Devashish, and how she would happily

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settle down in America—although Nandini in fact had no idea what life in America was like. Amaresh, though, sometimes brought her back down to earth because of his reservations about Ray Babu. Even after such a long time he had not been able to rid himself of the doubt and displeasure that had entered his mind at their first encounter. He still had the feeling that there was another man hiding behind the façade of a gentleman, and that he should unmask him, but he had not been able to do it. He could not tell his feelings to anybody else, because, in the meantime, Ray Babu had won them all over. Yet sometimes he would share his misgivings with Nandini. They should have been told right from the beginning how old Devashish was, what his job was, how much he earned, etc. After all these days, it was not possible to ask such questions. They knew there were problems getting a visa to take one's wife to America. They never talked about this with Ray Babu, but sometimes Amaresh would ask Nandini, "Are we doing the right thing?" Confronted with such an unexpected question Nandini would fall silent and look at him blankly. Quickly collecting herself, she would answer, "You've got a rotten mind. If you don't believe me, ask your friends." Vexed, Amaresh would go back to the sitting room and continue discussing the wedding arrangements with Ray Babu.

Soon, the wedding day was at hand and Amaresh became very busy. All the work—printing the cards, writing the addresses, hiring the Kalyanmandap for the wedding ceremony and arranging for a caterer—was carried out with

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the help of Ray Babu, who kept an eye on everything and made sure that nothing was amiss. As a result Amaresh's expenses for the marriage ceremony were much less than he had expected. Anytime he was worried about running short of something, Ray Babu would supply what was needed from his own house.

The day finally came when Amaresh went with Ray Babu to the airport to receive Devashish. Seeing him for the first time, Amaresh was disappointed, but he consoled himself that appearances are not really important and that what matters most is character. Character is everything in a human being. But what did he know about Devashish's character? When he arrived back home, after dropping Ray Babu and his son at their place, it was late at night. Nandini was waiting up for him and when he came in, she asked how the boy was to look at. It was not right to call Tutlu a boy, but not in a mood to argue with Nandini at such a late hour, he only said, "Fine, just as you thought".

In spite of all his misgivings, he was really touched by Ray Babu's conduct on the day of the marriage. He felt warmth and respect for Ray Babu and rebuked himself for his earlier suspicions. Not only did Ray Babu not create any problems, but he saw to it that everything went well, as if he himself were the one giving away a daughter in marriage. He busied himself with looking after the guests. The marriage went smoothly and Bini left for Ray Babu's house.

After Bini had gone, when they were alone for the first time, Amaresh and Nandini discussed the marriage.

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Devashish had arrived only a day or two before, and they had not had a chance to get to know him well. They were worried about how Bini had taken it all. They had decided to go to Ray Babu's house and see for themselves, when Ray Babu himself arrived with his son and daughter-in-law. This time too Ray Babu charmed them and there was no time for Amaresh and Nandini to talk to Bini in private. Two days later, Ray Babu sent a message that Devashish was going back to America in a week and would send for Bini once he had arranged for her visa.

This again created suspicion in Amaresh's mind. He asked Nandini, "Did you know Ray Babu was planning to send Devashish to America first and that Bini would only go later?" Hearing him complain she replied, "You yourself said that it is difficult these days to get a visa to go to America. Why are you blaming Ray Babu? If you were so concerned, why didn't you discuss all this with Ray Babu before the marriage?"

After a while, Nandini's tone softened. "Devashish is a good boy," she said. "He'll soon arrange for Bini's visa." Faced with Amaresh's silence, she asked, "Didn't you like Devashish?" Amaresh said, "No, no, what's there not to like? Where else could we have found such a good husband for Bini?" Devashish was quiet and gentle, and like Ray Babu he was also friendly; there were no grounds on which to fault him. Still, Amaresh was not able to set his mind at rest.

After Devashish left to go back to America, Ray Babu often took Bini to her parents' house, but each time Amaresh

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and Nandini were forced to face the fact that Bini was no longer theirs. She had become more serious. She never spoke to them about the old days; she only talked about Ray Babu's household, which did not interest Amaresh in the least. Their relations were now so distant, that even though she wanted to, Nandini could not ask Bini directly whether she was happy in her marriage. The day Bini addressed Ray Babu as 'father' in front of Amaresh, he felt completely heartbroken and angry with Ray Babu.

One day, Ray Babu phoned to say that he would come at noon. Nandini busily began preparing food, but Ray Babu arrived along with Bini, bringing Chinese food. For Amaresh this was simply another of the ways in which Ray Babu always kept him in his debt. But, as always, Ray Babu entertained everybody and the hours spent in his company were pleasant. He recounted the problems he was having obtaining Bini's visa, but reassured them that he should be getting it soon.

After Ray Babu and Bini left, Amaresh and Nandini were lost in thought. They tried to guess from her words and behaviour whether she was happy. Although there was nothing to indicate otherwise, she seemed to have wilfully distanced herself from them for having married her off; her silence seemed both a protest and an accusation. Although they did not tell each other what they were thinking, both were disturbed by the same thought. That day, seeing Nandini brooding after Bini had left, Amaresh asked her, "What do you think?" Wiping her face with the fringe of her sari, Nandini responded with another question, "About

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what?" Amaresh decided not to say anything, but he was worried about Bini. "How long will Bini stay with that old man?" he asked. Nandini herself was less satisfied with Ray Babu than before, but when Amaresh raised the question, she retorted, "What else can be done? He's trying his best." "Should I see what I can do?" asked Amaresh. Nandini laughed, "You're not able to do anything. What could you do to help get the visa? When a capable man like Ray Babu can't manage, what could you do?" Amaresh answered, "Who knows if he's telling the truth?" "Your mind's rotten," she said. "You're always suspicious of everybody."

In fact, Amaresh's suspicions were unfounded. One morning a few days later, Ray Babu brought Bini's passport stamped with the visa from the American Embassy, adding that within a day or two the ticket Devashish had already mailed would also arrive. Though their worries were over, Amaresh and Nandini were saddened by the idea that Bini was leaving for a foreign country. Ray Babu became very busy with the arrangements for her departure. The tickets arrived, and he talked on the telephone with Devashish to fix the date she would leave. The day for Bini to say goodbye to her parents was approaching. Nobody had imagined that everything would happen so fast. Nandini reproached Amaresh, "Your nagging made it happen this quickly, otherwise our daughter would have been with us a little longer."

They accompanied Ray Babu and Bini to the airport and saw her off. Their eyes were full of tears, but Bini remained

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in full control of herself. It seemed to Nandini and Amaresh that she had become a complete stranger. There was no warmth or intimacy in her words of farewell. The time for her to leave arrived, while they were giving her inane bits of advice, such as telephone us, write regularly, don't forget to take your cold medicine. And then she went inside the airport and disappeared from sight.

Returning home after midnight and going to bed, Amaresh said, "I don't feel well." "It would have been better to have had her with us for a few days more," said Nandini. "It's not that," Amresh replied. "Who knows if Bini is happy with Devashish and Ray Babu and this marriage of hers." On hearing this, Nandini got angry, "You've been complaining about everything since the day of her marriage; you're overly suspicious of Ray Babu. Can't you see how happy Bini is? Where else could we have found a good boy like Devashish?" After a pause, Nandini added, "If there was a problem, wouldn't she have told us? We married her to such a suitable boy; what more could we, as parents, have done for her? I'm sure Bini will be happy."

They switched off the light to go to sleep. The events of the day had tired Amaresh out, and just as he was falling off to sleep he heard a suppressed cry from Nandini, "Listen to me; is our Bini really happy?" Amaresh heard the question but pretended to be asleep, although he knew that sleep wouldn't come.

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The Inevitable

WHEN GIVING THEIR CLASSES ALL COLLEGE TEACHERS have their own particular ways of speaking, their own gestures. Here is how Nandanandan gave his classes: entering the classroom he would strike a pose and maintain it until the class was over. After taking attendance he would fix his gaze on a student in the middle of the third row, and it would never waver throughout the period. He spoke slowly in a singsong voice and, whether it was Shakespeare or Eliot, he had the same flat monotone. Throughout a sad look would be fixed on his face, relieved only for a fleeting moment by the hint of a smile at the sound of the bell marking the end of the period. Needless to say, Nandanandan's classes were uninspiring, dry and boring. Instead of listening to him, students mainly went about their own business, talking to each other. Nandanandan knew this, but he had given up letting it bother him a long time ago.

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Long ago too he had left behind many other things, such as an ordinary childhood, a poverty-striken youth, his first job, the temporary excitement and warmth of marriage, fame and recognition as a writer, the repetitive nature of his job, and then suddenly one day the death of Karuna. Now all that was left for him was the endless ennui of an uneventful life. He no longer even had the will and energy to wrest himself from the grip of despair and emptiness; there was only the easy passage, neither fast nor slow, of days, months and years.

The day the face in the middle of the third row stuck out its tongue to tease him, an obstacle appeared on his way to a simple life. It was not possible for him to stop in the middle of the lecture and reflect on it, and Nandanandan felt that perhaps he was mistaken in what he thought he had seen. Nevertheless he discovered that—something he had not yet realised—the face that had stuck out its tongue belonged to a girl. Still, he resumed teaching, his eyes glued to a particular point. When he got up at the end of the class, he could not help but notice the girl was closing one eye, winking at him. At this, the flickering smile that usually appeared on Nandanandan's face at the end of a class disappeared.

That day on his way home, he was lost in thought. At first he tried to dismiss the incident as an illusion. But how could he be mistaken about those two gestures. When he realised this, his mind drifted from fearful uneasiness towards romantic longing. After many years, an untimely

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spring like this had touched the innermost part of his being. He tried to recollect the face of the girl but could not, and suddenly he felt dejected. As he looked around him he came to realise the futility of his existence. What constituted his world were three boxes, his servant and two rooms in a rented house. The world which had been his until now suddenly seemed unfamiliar. To escape it, he got up and rifled through some old papers.

At some point in his youth he had written poetry, and his first book of poems had been published more than twenty years ago. At the time it had created a certain amount of talk. Although it had not gone into a second edition, the poems were included in different anthologies and were still popular and still discussed. Nandanandan dug out from among his papers a copy of the book in brittle condition. It was a testimony to his past. Browsing through it, he was reminded of those days when it had been the subject of conversations. The forty-one poems were the œuvre of his short poetic life; he had not written anything before or since. For a while following his silence there had been talk about his promising talent. But now all that was left was an historical evaluation of the poems; no one considered him to be a poet. He too had given up any hope of gaining recognition as the creator of the poems.

Reading them today after a long period, he once again realised their connection to his essential being. He was engrossed in them, reading one after another. Each one took him to precious periods in his youth. When he finally

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put the book down, after finishing the last poem, he was lost in another world and another time. His dream was interrupted by the servant calling him to have his meal. But even if he was back in his world, the incoherencies continued to envelop him. It seemed that the world he had been engrossed in only a while before was not his own and that thinking about it would be trespassing. The poems he had read were like those of some unknown poet; if he were to teach them he would have to study them. The thought of the classroom once again brought his thoughts back to the incident. Even when he went to bed after eating, he could not stop thinking about it. One after another, delight and fear plagued him throughout his sleepless night.

The next day it was with fear and trepidation that he ventured into the classroom. He had decided that he would try to recognise the girl. But when he looked at her after striking his favourite pose, he could not see anything other than a non-descript face. It seemed to him that he would not even recognise her outside the classroom. Lost in thought he finished his class, no different in fact from that of any other day. The girl in the third row did not make a face or stick out her tongue. He was both relieved and disappointed.

Once again he returned to his dull routine; and as time passed it seemed to him that what had happened was merely a figment of his imagination. He forgot his few days of excitement, when he had reread the poetry he had written a long time ago and stayed awake night after night. These days, when he could bring himself to look at the face in the

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third row, he found nothing wild. Not even a trace of wildness. He only knew that her name was Kavita, and the name evoked romantic longings in him. It was during this time, while he was alone in the common room, that two girls came in. Handing him a notebook Kavita said, "I've written some poems. Please correct them."

Nandanandan had thought up many ways to meet Kavita, but this had not been one of them. Astounded, he kept staring at them. Seeing him silent like this, the two girls sat on the chairs facing him and Kavita said, "My name is Kavita; I'm your student. I've been writing poetry for a long time but I haven't tried to publish it since I don't know whether it's any good. You're a famous poet. I thought that if you were to make suggestions to improve the poems I could submit them for publication." Taking the notebook, Nandanandan looked at it. The letters in the notebook began to run before his eyes and he was unable to decipher them. When Nandanandan looked up from the notebook at the two girls, the other one said, "I'm her friend. My name's Babita." Sensing that Nandanandan had not understood her intended joke, she added, "Of course, that's not really my name That's what people call me." Mustering his courage, Nandanandan said, "Leave the notebook with me, I'll give you my opinion once I've had a look at it."

That night Nandanandan spent a good deal of time looking through the notebook. Everything seemed beautiful to him: the zigazag lines of immature words, the bad handwriting, the incorrect spellings, the meaningless stanzas,

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and above all the poems, which had no vitality and strength. He took delight in uttering the name Kavita over and over again, although while doing so he had to keep the other name, Babita, out of his mind. Even after going through the unreadable poems twice, he could not put down the notebook; he wanted to catch sight of Kavita's face, which frequently peeped through the pages, hoping it would stick out its tongue and wink at him.

The next day, after his class, he waited in the common room for the two girls—however hard he might try, he could not think of Kavita without thinking of her friend. But they did not come that day, and Nandanandan on his way home was once again filled with anxiety. In the meantime he repeatedly read over the poems and tried to find deeper meanings in them than the ones the poet had intended. Most of the poems were about love, which further added to his discomfiture.

Then, Kavita and Babita unexpectedly came to meet him. This time he was not alone and felt awkward to be with them among his colleagues. Kavita asked, "Have you read the poems? How do you like them?" Without answering he looked around; his colleagues seemed to have forgotten everything else and to be listening to their conversation. He had been prepared to say so many things about the poems, but from his mouth, in a low voice, came only, "Beautiful, very beautiful." Not satisfied with this Kavita looked at him questioningly and once more Nandanandan could only say, "Very beautiful". "Well,"

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Kavita replied, "We'll come to your house to take back the notebook. Then you can tell me what else you have to say."

Although Kavita hadn't said she would come the following day, Nandanandan spent that night putting the house in order. He picked up all the old newspapers, cigarette butts, broken pens, torn underwear, and rusted pins, and woke up his servant at midnight to tell him to throw them out. Things were put back in their place, and by early morning the house was finally clean. Then he went to sleep. But, as he could not sleep, he went through the poems, which he had read over and over, once again.

In the morning, Nandanandan took his bath, had his meal, and waited for Kavita. But like the times before, the wait turned out to be in vain. The following days he grew tired of keeping the house clean, rearranging the furniture and getting dressed up. The day she finally arrived, the house was untidy and he was wearing only a lungi. Seeing him like that Babita unsuccessfully tried to repress a smile, covering her face with the fringe of her sari while Kavita gave her a look warning her not to laugh. In the meantime, he went inside and changed his clothes. "Did you really read all my poems?" asked Kavita. Without saying anything Nandanandan took out the notebook, wiped the cover and opened it. When he had rehearsed the meeting with Kavita, he had imagined many a meaningful dialogue but confronted like this no other words came to him except that they were 'beautiful'.

"I've read all your poems," replied Kavita, "and they've inspired me to write these." In his brief career as a writer,

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no one had told him anything like this. Expanding on what Kavita had said, her friend added, "Kavita can recite all your poems by heart." Normally this would have delighted him, but as he had just seen her smile ironically he became serious and pretended not to have heard. Reading an incoherent line from the notebook, he looked at Kavita, full of praise.

"Do you think a magazine would publish them?" Kavita asked. "Of course," he replied. "Certainly. Poems which are even worse than these often get published." After completing his sentence he realised that what he had said was not particularly kind. "Whose poetry are you thinking of?" asked Babita. Luckily Kavita did not allow her friend to continue. "Keep quiet," she told her. In the meantime, Nandanandan quoted two more lines from the notebook.

Babita remarked, although Nandanandan was not certain whether she was mocking him, "You recite beautifully. Please read us some of your own poems." Kavita agreed and shyly he opened his book. He was relieved that he had already taken it out of the trunk, otherwise he would have had to pick through old clothes and newspapers to find it. He read four lines from a poem. Before he could finish, Kavita recited the next four lines from memory. Except for one word, she knew them by heart.

Kavita asked, "Were all your poems written for a particular girl?" The question made him think. Is poetry written for a particular person? In most poems, the "you" can be your own self or someone you are addressing. Is a poem meant, then, for someone in particular? Is poetry

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personal news, a rhymed message for somebody else? A message on paper, a poetic post card? Writing such poetry, does the poet see only one face? Who was the 'you' in Nandanandan's poetry? A very real fellow student, the neighbour's daughter, a distant relative or someone met in a dream, seen in a film, a character in a book, a figment of his imagination? A composite of all of these; someone from his private wonderland? Suddenly he thought of the dedication and realised the meaning of her question. He closed his mouth which had been open until then, and said, "No these poems were not written for Karuna."

But they did not understand, since they had not seen the dedication and did not know who Karuna was. They smiled, looking at each other. "Then who did you write all these poems for," Kavita asked. Taking control of the situation, he answered, "Poems are not for any person in particular." And then he rambled on as if he were in the classroom, one incoherent and meaningless sentence after another. After this brief lecture, Kavita did not dare ask him anything more. They were about to get up to leave when Kavita said, "There must have been some mistakes in my poems. Please correct them. I—I mean we—will come back." After they left, Nandanandan realised he had forgotten to offer them the biscuits and tea he had bought. Taking a biscuit from the pack, he scolded his servant. The poor boy could not understand why he was angry.

Now Nandanandan set himself to correcting the poems. There was not a single line worthy of a critic's attention, but

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that had escaped his notice before. So on a piece of paper he jotted down the different suggestions to be discussed with Kavita. He worked seriously on her poetry and within a few days he had jotted down several pages of comments.

When the two came to see him again, he eagerly showed them everything he had written down. As he was going on at length analyzing one particular line, explaining why certain words should be changed, Kavita lost patience and said, "I asked you to make corrections not to give lectures. If you don't have the time, return the notebook." Nandanandan's face turned pale. Dejected, he said, "Your poems are so beautiful I don't want to change them." "You don't want to change them," she replied irritably, "but you've found a hundred errors." "Don't worry, I'll correct them," he offered. After this, they had biscuits and tea. Kavita talked to him free and easily once again, and so he did not become depressed. Once again he felt happy and content.

The next time Kavita came on her own, which pleased Nandanandan. He offered her tea and then brought out her notebook. With a lot of work, he had corrected and improved her poetry, but her manuscript looked like that of a beginner, in which the teacher had corrected all the spelling mistakes. As she turned the pages of her notebook, her face reddened. Setting her cup on the floor, she stood up. She was furious: "You mean to say I don't know anything about poetry! that I can't write poetry! What drove you to correct my poems like this? What do you know about why I chose certain words for certain contexts? Thank you for

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doing so much work." Without giving him a chance to say anything she left. Nandanandan realised that an imaginary chapter of his life was over.

But life is like poetry; neither its beginning nor its end is predetermined. One day, quite unexpectedly, Kavita and her friend came back into Nandanandan's life. Kavita apologised, "Everything you suggested was right. After I read your comments, I realised how much the poems had been improved. I shouldn't have become angry with you". Overflowing with happiness, he replied, "No, no, don't worry about that. A poem is like a poet's child: he doesn't like anyone tampering with it. Had I been you, I would have reacted in the same way." Kavita asked for tea, saying to Babita, "You said you have work to do. Go, and I'll talk with our teacher about my poetry." After Babita left she talked about things other than poetry, asked Nandanandan about his private life, and lovingly talked to him about other subjects. She suggested that if he combed his hair with the part on the other side it would definitely improve his appearance. While leaving, she said, "Why don't you write poetry any more? Start writing again. But your first poem should be for me."

After that, Kavita visited him frequently. At first he was afraid what people might think, but then he became bolder, telling himself, "Let others think what they want to. What difference does it make?" That day he waited for Kavita with his hair parted on the other side. When Kavita saw him, she burst out laughing. Once she had calmed down,

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seeing Nandanandan looking at her like a fool, she said, "Your face is like an owl's." Seeing him turn pale, she added, "The face of an owl is rather beautiful. A little owl used to sit in a tree near our house. How lovely, how cute was that little owl of mine!" At this his face brightened. "An owl is the only creature whose face resembles a man's," he thought to himself. "Give me a comb and I'll fix your hair," said Kavita.

When Kavita put her palm on his face, a ripple of delight ran through his body. All the happiness he had forgotten came to mind. Not only did he see a new face in the mirror but he also felt he had been reborn. He knew that if he wore glasses, he would look as wise as an owl.

That day while Kavita was getting up to leave Nandanandan gathered the courage to hold her palm in his hands. He thought Kavita would yield to his embrace, but snatching her hand away, she stood there like Goddess Chandi on the warpath. Her eyes were burning and her lips trembling in wrath. She said, "What do you think I am? Do you think I'm cheap? Just because I come to your house and talk to you? You're my teacher and my father's age. Is this how you behave? I'll certainly report this to the principal."

She left in a storm. The next day, he was afraid to go to the college. He spent the whole day in sorrow, shame and fear, thinking that the incident must have been a hot topic at the college and that he must have been dismissed. His heart beat more and more wildly and he imagined himself

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with different diseases. He thought that his sudden death would put an end to everything. He stayed in the house with the doors shut; if there was a sound outside he imagined that the college peon had come with a notice from the principal.

Kavita herself saved him from this pathetic depressing state. One fine morning she turned up at his door, as if nothing had happened. She had a new poem with her. Giving it to Nandanandan, she asked, "Is it any good?" Nonplussed, he clutched the poem and sat down for sometime. When Kavita smiled at him and put her hand on his, he forgot everything. Ridding his mind of fear and anxiety, he began to read her poem.

Kavita said, "Even after all my questions you haven't told me who you wrote your poems for. But if you ask me, I'll tell you who I write for." Since he did not ask her, Kavita came over beside him, sat down and said, "All of my poems are written for you."

It was as if the events which followed were preordained. If at one moment Nandanandan reached the heights of immeasurable happiness, then at another he was thrust into a bottomless hell. He never knew what and when things were going to happen. Everyday he would find himself caught between hope and anxiety, between happiness and bitter sorrow. The person who ruled his life was thirty years younger than him and her mind changed from instant to instant, like the shape of rainbearing clouds. Nandanandan carefully copied the girl's poems in a new notebook all the

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while thinking of his future. Now he had no escape. He would be left dangling like a helpless puppet in her hands. Till death provided him with the ultimate release.

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The Intimate Stranger

THEY KNEW EACH OTHER AS WELL AS ANY TWO PEOPLE can, Ramanath had no doubts about that. Neither he nor Seema kept any secrets. It was as if each had completely opened up to the other, as if their thoughts were transparent.

It was always Ramanath who ended up having problems because of this. He would be caught in a lie on returning home late after being out with his friends, and Seema could read the truth in his face. Despite his stories about overtime at the office, she would embarrass him by telling him exactly how he had spent his time and with whom.

At times Ramanath felt Seema had some supernatural power which helped her read his mind. He had arrived at this conclusion after a few days of marriage. Once Ramanath had tip-toed up from behind as she sat looking out of the window in the bedroom. He had hoped to surprise her, but at the last moment she had calmly asked, "Is there something you want?" She said it so casually that he wondered if there

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was a mirror in front of her and not a window. It had startled him and also frightened him a little.

Something similar happened when one of Ramanath's distant relatives came to visit. The striped shirt the man wore reminded him of a shirt he had once had, made from material an uncle had brought him from abroad. It was now old and torn, whereas his relative's shirt was new. His uncle must have bought a good length of material to get it at a bargain; he was still, it seemed, making gifts from it. As he thought of this a smile flashed across his face. Looking at Seema, he realised that she too was trying to suppress a smile. The same thought had crossed her mind at the same time.

Someone has written that love is the total understanding of one another. Ramanath knew that according to such a definition he and Seema truly loved each other. They could understand something simply through a look, something which would have taken time and words to explain to a third person. If he gave Seema a look at the dining table as he ate a spoonful of curry, she would answer his unspoken question, "No there's no tomato, just as the doctor ordered."

Whatever one might say about arranged marriages, Seema had come into his life as a blessing. He had fallen in love with her immediately and whenever he thought about it, he would come to the conclusion that if he had been asked to pick his partner, he would have chosen nobody else. Sometimes, of course, he was attracted to other women. When he came into close contact with them, however, and saw the way they behaved and looked at life, then he would

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realise that he could not have lived with them for more than a week. Ridding his mind of such sinful thoughts he would promise himself never again to harbour adulterous thoughts. Seema alone was his mate for this life and after. He would gaze at her apologetically, afraid she might have read his straying mind.

Ramanath spared Seema no details of his day-to-day existence. One of the reasons for this may have been that he had no other friends. Each evening he would tell her all that had happened at the office and on the way there and back. Although Seema had not met most of the people he talked about, she had a fairly clear picture of each of them. The day Ramanath told her that the Manager was always scolding everybody at the staff meetings but that someone had finally talked back to him, Seema said, "None of you has any courage; it must have been Subodh Babu who answered back." She was quite right of course, although she had met neither the Manager nor Subodh Babu. Another time, Ramanath got a postcard from somewhere saying. "My son, Adikand, is going for an interview. He will meet you. Please try to help him. I am not doing well. Your childhood friend, Bubuna." There was no address, only the name of the town—Raghunathpur—on the letter. No matter how hard he tried, Ramanath could not place the name. But Seema solved the problem quickly. "That must be your friend Chaitanya Babu," she said. "You told me once that a friend of yours had given up his job and was living in a village; this must be his son." He must have told her about that a long

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time before, because he had no recollection at all when and where this Chaitanya Babu, alias Bubuna, had been a childhood friend of his. Instead of going into it any further, he asked her, "How did you know his name was Bubuna?" "Four or five years ago," she replied, "another boy—Makarand—came to visit us; this boy must be Makarand's younger brother."

That morning he had just stepped out onto the verandah, to leave for the office, when Seema said, "Let me warn you; don't go to see the Manager today." This alarmed him. Only two days before he and the Manager had had a heated exchange of words, but he had not told Seema about it. Yesterday he had decided that he would go to the Manager and give him a piece of his mind. He had kept his decision an absolute secret from Seema, but to no avail. Of course, he did not go to see the Manager; instead, he went to consult a colleague. Biharilal Babu was known as a calm and knowledgeable person. When he needed advice, Ramanath would go to him. While others would laugh away his worries as matters of little importance, Biharilal would listen to him seriously and give him some thoughtful advice. When Ramanath told him about what had happened that morning, Biharilal said, "You know the Manager well. After a day or two...". Ramanath said, "No, I'm not worried about what the Manager said; that's the way things are with him. I want to know how my wife found out about this."

"Oh, is that what you're asking me about? After living together for a long time, husband and wife come to know

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each other so well that there are things which do not need to be expressed. It's as if the body and soul of the two have become one. In some cases, towards the end of their lives, husbands and wives even resemble each other."

"How can that be?" asked Ramanath. "One Mohanty Babu lives at the end of your lane," answered Biharilal. "How long have you known him for?"

Right, Ramanath thought to himself, the old man and old woman did look like brother and sister. At first Mohanty Babu had been lean and lanky and his wife, heavy. Now he had put on weight and his wife had slimmed down. Besides, they imitated each other's way of talking, behaving and walking; they acted alike. Together it was as if they shared one body and soul. Biharilal was indeed right. If that was also their fate, Ramanath and Seema would one day be like the Mohantys.

But that was not to be. At the age of forty-nine Seema left him for the other world. It seemed to Ramanath that she had always known when she would die, but had kept it secret from him. Although he had thought he knew everything about her, she had not given him any indication that this, the most important thing in her life, was going to happen. But, later on, reminded of little incidents, Ramanath was certain that she had foreseen her end. Before dying, she put everything in order, and although her death was sudden she did not leave behind any unfinished business. She had resolved all problems big and small and arranged everything, including their son's marriage. There were no loose ends,

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and Ramanath had no difficulty managing the household without her.

Suddenly he was reminded of something Seema had once said. "My fate is not to become a widow," she had told him, and with such confidence and pride that Ramanath had been astounded. What could she mean? Fearfully, he had asked her what she meant. " I mean that I will die in your lap as a lucky woman with the sindoor on my head." Ramanath had completely forgotten about this, but her death was just as she had said it would be. One day Seema, who had never fallen ill, had a high fever and had to be rushed to the hospital. The doctors could not diagnose her illness, but she remained cheerful, despite obtaining no relief from the fever. Instead, it was she who consoled Ramanath, who was becoming extremely worried. Lying on the hospital bed she still ran the household. Taking leave from the office Ramanath stayed with her most of the time, and when he said he would send for their son, Seema asked him not to, saying, "Why put him through so much trouble? Why should he come so far, take time off from his job and spend so much money?"

Fatigued at the end of the day, Ramanath had that night fallen asleep in a chair by her bed. It was quite late when the nurse came in and switched on the light to give Seema her medicine. The light woke him up. Opening his eyes, Ramanath saw it was raining outside. By then Seema was breathing irregularly. The nurse put her hand on Seema's forehead and said to Ramanath, "Please hold her, so she

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can take her medicine." Ramanath stood up and went close to Seema's bed. Sitting on the edge, he put Seema's head in his lap. When the nurse gave her a little water to take her medicine, she gasped. Putting down the glass, the nurse ran to call the doctor. Not knowing what to do, Ramanath held Seema's head more carefully in his lap and looked out of the window. The rain was falling harder and a gust of cold wind blew in through the window. His watch said 2 a.m.

Seema had said something about two o'clock at night to Ramanath, but he did not remember exactly what. Perhaps she had told him she would die exactly at that time. It took him a long time to accept her absence. At first he wondered what use it was to continue living without her. He remembered many of the small incidents of their life together, such as when she had said something to him and when they had done something together, but gradually he was able to admit to himself that she was gone and the daily grind of life kept him occupied.

Once he retired and had plenty of time to himself, Seema once again occupied his mind. As if she was saying, "You put me out of your mind for a long time, but now where will you hide?" Or, when he was about to eat something which the doctor had forbidden, she would say, "Careful! Don't touch that." These days Ramanath did not sleep well; he would often get up at midnight and not go back to sleep. One night, it was raining heavily. After closing the window, he noticed as he was going back to bed that it was 2 a.m. A shiver ran through his bones, veins and arteries.

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Ramanath decided to give away Seema's sarees and other clothing. Until then he had not touched anything that had belonged to her, as if he felt that one day she would come back and wear them once again. With the passage of time these feelings faded and now, opening her almirah, he took everything out. Like all her things, her clothes were neatly arranged. While rummaging through them old memories came flooding back and he felt restless. Regaining control of himself, he took the clothes out of the almirah; while doing this, an envelope fell on the floor.

There was no address on the envelope, and it was sealed. Ramanath sat quietly holding it for some time. A few days before her death, Seema had torn up all her old papers. She had either forgotten to tear up this envelope or had wanted not to. It placed him in a quandary. He felt he had no right to open it, especially since she had deliberately kept it hidden, but soon his curiosity soon got the best of him and he slit it open with a knife. Inside there were three black and white photographs and a piece of blue writing paper, on which was written: "On Thursday I'll meet you at the same place, at 4 p.m instead of 3:30." This was followed by three crosses and signed 'Su'. He suppressed his immediate reaction to what he had read and carefully examined the photographs. In each of them there were five girls, including Seema, all in their early twenties and wearing similar sarees. In one, the five of them were looking at the camera, smiling. In another they sat in a circle and everyone looked outside it. In the third they held each other's hands and gazed at an

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object placed in front of them, but it was not possible to clearly make out what the object was.

Ramanath gave up arranging the sarees and stood up. Closing the almirah, he placed the envelope on the table and examined the blue piece of paper more carefully. The letters were well rounded, the handwriting of a young girl or boy. The paper must have been bought especially, probably to write a love letter. Of course, college girls too use blue paper to write letters to each other. Had it been deep blue Ramanath would have thought the choice had been made by someone very young, but it was a light, bright blue, the colour of love and intimacy. This little piece of paper communicated an exuberant message of unfettered feelings. Ramanath's eyes now moved to the photographs. Seema looked very beautiful and stood out from her friends. That was the way she had looked at the time of their marriage. There were albums containing photographs of Seema at that period of her life, and Ramanath thought of putting these into one of them.

But the two-line letter continued to worry him. Who could this 'Su' be? And not Ku? Sujata, Sunita, Sukhada, Sumati, Sunanda, Sulata, Sujala, Sufala? Or could it be Subodh, Sunand, Suresh, Subimal, Sudarshan? There are not too many names of males beginning with 'Su'. Why wasn't the name written out in full? Was it out of intimacy or an attempt to evade curious eyes? Had he seen it in a pile of other papers, he would not have given it a second thought; but carefully kept inside an envelope, this short message

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made him curious. The letter must have been addressed to Seema. If it was written a long time ago, why had she preserved it? Ramanath tried to determine its age. As the paper was of good quality, it was in good condition, and the message looked as if it had been written recently. Might someone have written to Seema not too long ago? When he was at the office and their grown-up son was out of the house with his friends, how had she spent her time? There was a Subodh infamous for his associations with girls. His name begins with 'Su', but Ramanath could not remember what his handwriting looked like.

Shame, shame, what was he thinking? Wasn't it possible that a friend of Seema's might have written to her, asking to meet at a saree shop? Ramanath tried to remember the names of Seema's friends but could not think of any beginning with 'Su'. The time indicated, between 3:30 and 4 p.m, was during office hours. In the West, adulterous affairs carried on at that time of day are termed 'love in the afternoon,' but there was no hint of anything improper in the letter, only a short direct message. But then, what was the meaning of the three crosses? Three pre-determined addresses of love, three kisses or three something else? Once again he was being driven to speculate and imagine the worse—Seema dressed-up and waiting for somebody in front of the saree shop.

Ramanath decided not to think about the letter anymore. He ate his supper and went to bed, but could not sleep. The letters on the blue piece of paper flashed before his eyes, clear and enlarged. Strange thoughts entered his mind.

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Once he had left home for four days. He began imagining what Seema might have done while he was away. Small trivial events from the distant past began to assail him, helping to blacken her character. Once sitting with guests, the aanchal of her saree had slipped from her chest. Another time he had forced her to utter obscene words and later on, when he asked her where she had learnt them, she had only smiled. When they were first married he had asked her if she had loved anybody before him and instead of giving him a direct answer, she had asked him how he could ask her such an obscene question?

After a sleepless night, he thought of asking Biharilal about it. But what could he ask him? Show him the letter and ask him who his wife's lover could have been. Or ask him, "Did you ever hear any scandals about Seema?" Even if Biharilal, a gentle man to the core, knew anything, he would reply, "Have you gone mad? Having doubts about a wife who was like a goddess?" No, there was no question of going to Biharilal. If Seema were to come back to life he would ask her to explain the mystery of the letter, but would he even have the heart to do that? He had not been able to ask her whom she had learnt the obscene words from. Perhaps Seema would give such an easy explanation that he would have been compelled to believe her. Indeed, his doubts about her would have humiliated him in her eyes.

Day after day Ramanath remained obsessed by these thoughts. Initially he thought that one of her friends might

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have written this frivolous note, but gradually he began to be convinced that she was not innocent, and felt sad and humiliated at the thought that he had been betrayed the entire years of his married life.

While he was feeling so tormented, something else happened which served to further upset him. One day he was reading a magazine article about modern witches. In the article there was a picture of girls sitting in a circle, undergoing initiation. The picture reminded him of the group photograph he had discovered. Ramanath took out the three photographs and once again looked at them carefully.

The photographs seemed to have been taken in a desolate field and the trees bordering the edge could be seen clearly. Possibly a spot for a picnic. Why would five girls go to such a desolate place? Suddenly he realised that there must have been a sixth person as well, who had taken the pictures. Were these five women members of a secret organisation and was it an important moment in their initiation? What sign of power, what tantric design were they sitting around? What secret mantra, with the blessing of what goddess, possessed them? Ramanath was reminded of the many times Seema seemed to have a supernatural premonition about what was going to happen, a knowledge normal human beings do not have. Seema was always able to read his mind. Before he could approach her, she always seemed to be waiting for him. She even knew the exact moment she would die. Now every detail of her behaviour seemed suspicious

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to him. Every time Seema had talked in a low voice with someone in the drawing room they were probably exchanging secrets. All the friends she had often visited were perhaps members of a coven of witches, with the rule, perhaps, that they never become widows.

The more Ramanath thought about this the more he was convinced that Seema, in addition to her married life, had led a secret parallel life. In this alternative life, there were lovers, secret groups, secluded rendezvous and coded language. The hours when he was not with Seema were hers alone. In her life he was insignificant; she had merely set aside some time for him in a life that was entirely her own. Ramanath's mind became poisoned against her. She was a libertine and a debauchee, unworthy of the love and affection he had given her.

Thinking of this, Ramanath became scared. As if Seema's ghost standing before him had asked, "Why are you thinking such terrible things about me." The image of Seema after a bath standing under the whirling fan with her wet hair undone so that it would dry, an image which had once charmed him, now frightened him. She was not the same Seema who had lived with him as a devoted wife for thirty years; she was the Seema who was a member of a coven of witches, she was the gorgeously dressed Seema who amorously waited for her lover. It seemed to Ramanath that he had never known her at all.

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The Furlough

PARAMANAND HAD APPLIED FOR ONE MONTH'S LEAVE but had been given only a week, to be taken after the Puja holiday. For three years he had dreamt about being on leave, ever since he had joined the army, but something or other had always come up to make it impossible. Once, his leave had been cancelled just as he was about to take it. This time too he had not been certain until the very last moment that it would be granted, but, in the end, it was. When he had first began applying he would make plans about what to take for each member of the family, but after the many disappointments he had given up thinking about such things. Now, once again, he started making a list. He wanted to take something for everyone, but he faced two problems: he did not have enough money, and, at the front, where they were camped, the shops were very small. Nevertheless, he drew up a list of things to buy.

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He also noted down things to do once he was back home. Renewing his relationship with Sudha was foremost on his mind. He had had to leave her only a few months after their marriage. By then she was pregnant. He had received a letter about the problems with her delivery, but had not been able to do anything other than worry. At last a letter had come, putting his mind at ease, saying that Sudha had given birth to a fair-skinned son and that both mother and son were doing well. In the course of time, the news of his son growing up—turning over by himself on the bed, smiling at familiar faces, crawling, standing, calling his mother Ma, walking—reached Paramanand, making him all the more anxious to see him. They had sent a photograph, but he could not feel any great affection for the chubby little baby in the snapshot. Rather, he was cross with them because everyone wrote only about the baby, and never about Sudha.

When Sudha had come to his house as a bride, she was still almost a child. Paramanand had had a difficult time making friends with her and winning her over. This unsophisticated girl with little education knew nothing of the world and of life, and it was only with a great deal of patience and effort that he had been able to overcome her shyness. Later on she had become his clever disciple and learned her lessons well. That had been the most precious time for Paramanand; each night with Sudha was a time for experimentation. And although he would be satiated with pleasure, in the morning he would feel somehow incomplete, that something still had been left undone. The day would

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pass with him worrying about what was missing, and the night spent attempting to repair the loss.

Far from home, he spent each empty moment of every night thinking of Sudha. He turned over and over in his mind everything that had remained unfinished and would become desperate. In the most intense moments of the night, as he remembered every limb of Sudha's body and how each moved in pleasure, he would lose control and surrender himself to his hands.

Sometimes he felt guilty about thinking only of Sudha and not the others. He felt nothing towards his son and could not imagine how he would react seeing him for the first time. His father was always writing to him about the child, in such detail that Paramanand would soon lose interest. It was no fault of theirs, since the boy was closest to them now. He himself did not get along very well with his parents, and their relations had become even more distant when he did not get a job after graduation and simply sat around the house doing nothing. He had always said he would get married only after his younger sister, but that is not what had happened. A marriage was arranged against his will, and then he was blamed for not looking for a job once he was married. Paramanand realised that the distance separating him from his parents was made even greater by his complete devotion to Sudha and his spending most of his time with her. They would perhaps have been happier if he had disliked her. Initially they had loved Sudha, but Paramanand noticed that as he grew closer to her, they started liking her less.

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The relationship between Sudha and his sister, Uma, was a more difficult problem. If at times they acted like sisters, talking and joking, at others they would be sworn enemies and would not speak. At the root of their behaviour was their immaturity and fickleness; sometimes he had to act as a go-between, which placed him in a delicate position. Most of the times their quarrel was caused by something trifling. Once, for example, Uma had hidden Sudha's handkerchief. Although Uma had often done this to tease Sudha, this time she swore she had not even seen the handkerchief, let alone stolen it. But Sudha guessed that the missing handkerchief was Uma's handiwork. A few days after failing as mediator, he found both of them talking and laughing together again. When Paramanand asked Sudha where she had found her handkerchief, she replied, "What hanky?"

Living away from home Paramanand felt he had not been as close to his parents and sister as he should have. His father had worked as a petty government official in a town far away, and, as a child, Paramanand had been deprived of his love and affection. Whenever his father was home for the holidays, Paramanand would spend his days in fear. His father would try to teach him, and Paramanand was a poor student. Uma was only a baby at the time, and all his father's affection was focused on her. That was another reason for him to dislike his father. He preferred not to think back on his childhood days, as they had not been particularly happy. Later, when the family moved to the town, Paramanand

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was in a higher class in school and made some good friends. He became closer to them than to his family; gradually he drifted apart from his parents and sister.

Thinking of all this, he was reminded of how little time he spent talking to his family when he was home. After he finished his studies, even though he continued living with them, he did not talk much, and the entire house was clouded in sadness. When Sudha became part of the household, a temporary happiness descended upon them, but soon disagreements arose. If there was any tension, it was always he who was blamed, by his parents and by Sudha as well.

Paramanand had not been at all interested in joining the army but when he failed to get any other job, he applied to enlist. Fortunately or unfortunately, he was accepted. His father had by that time retired and settled in the small town, in the house he had built earlier, and was planning to marry Paramanand off. The news that he had been accepted came soon after his marriage. Intoxicated with the days of ecstasy with Sudha, he thought of not going. He tried his best to get another job, but when that failed he had no other choice but to leave.

Before he joined the army, there was always discord in the family, and perhaps he himself was to blame for this. Now it seemed to him they were driving him away against his will. He did not want to go and leave Sudha behind. His final days at home were spent with his friends; he ate out and stopped talking with his parents. Remembering these sad days, tears welled up in his eyes. His father was ageing.

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Bowing to his physical disabilities and financial helplessness, he had mellowed and gradually become less authoritarian. His mother was always ill. Because of all this, Paramanand should have behaved better and been more pleasant to them. The day he left home, they all came to the railway station to see him off. Even there he kept silent, as if some useless anger was rising within him. He wanted to say goodbye to Sudha in private but that was not possible, and when Uma said something jokingly he scolded her and her face went pale. On the platform his mother was crying, his father looked forlorn, and Sudha seemed lost. That was the last scene before the train left, he remembered now.

It tormented him still and he had decided that when he went home he would make up with everybody. That was what was on his mind as he purchased presents. The things he wanted to get for his parents were more expensive than he could afford. Buying a saree for Sudha, he was reminded of Uma's sullen face and so he purchased two similar ones in different colours. He also decided that he would have a secret present for Sudha. He did not know what to take for his son, and the shopkeeper came to his rescue; Paramanand immediately bought what he suggested, along with little decorative articles for the house. He felt he should have presents for his friends too. After making all the purchases he realised he had no money left for his journey, and had to borrow some from a colleague.

In the train he kept thinking of how to satisfy everyone at home. It would take him three days, changing trains, to

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reach his town, and he would be staying only three days. There was lots to do in such a short time. Father had written to him about problems relating to their property in the village, asking Paramanand to accompany him there. That wouldn't be possible on such a short leave. Perhaps next time. Before he had left for his job he had not been able to meet all his friends; this time he would. He had received a letter about a problem with his signature for the savings account he had opened at the bank before leaving; it was important that he correct that too. But all of these things did not amount to much considering that his main task was to cheer up everyone in the family. Thinking of this, he was reminded of Sudha's face, and he became preoccupied with how to spend his three short nights with her in the most satisfying way.

The train was very crowded and he could not get much sleep. He had decided to change out of his uniform only just before getting off the train—being in uniform had certain advantages. In the crowded compartment, though, he did not find it easy to change his clothes. By the time he was falling asleep, it was almost morning and the train stopped. The noise on the platform woke him up. He was happy that soon he would reach his station, but looking out he realised the train was running late. Scheduled to arrive in the morning, the train reached his station only at one-thirty in the afternoon. He had expected the family would all be there to meet him but was surprised to find only a young relative, who told him that because his mother was ill

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nobody had been able to come to the station. He was disappointed, and knew that all his planning for the next three days was in vain. His happiness to be back home vanished.

He had been thinking that when he got off the train the first thing he would do would be touch his parents' feet. He had never done this before and knew this small gesture would mark a new beginning in their relationship. This first disappointment upset him. When he reached home Uma and Sudha, along with a healthy baby, were at the door. Making a show of showering affection on the child, he touched Sudha without anyone noticing. She gave him a smile, but the child turned away and went back to sleep on Sudha's shoulder. Inside the house, Father was sitting on Mother's cot. Seeing Paramanand, everyone was happy, but all this happiness could not erase his sadness at his mother's serious illness. Although she had been bedridden for a month, nobody had written to him about it. His father seemed to have broken down, Uma to have lost her fickleness, and Sudha to have taken over all the family responsibilities. This made Sudha seem older. He had thought that as soon as he reached home everyone would crowd around him and ask him about life in the army and that in turn he would regale them with stories. Nothing like that happened. All the talk centred around Mother's illness: when it had begun, what medicine she was taking, and so on.

Opening his suitcase, he took out the clothes and saris and all the other gifts. Uma and Sudha stood next to him.

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However hard he tried to entice him, Bapu would not come to him but stood between Uma and Sudha. All the gifts he had brought home after days of deliberation and saving money now seemed worthless. While handing them to Uma and Sudha he felt ashamed and told them that next time he would have something better. Bapu refused to take the toy he had brought; he only took it from Sudha and quickly ran away. Sudha said, "This is the first time he's seeing you and he's shy; after three or four days he'll get used to you and go to you on his own." Paramanand did not say anything, but wished his leave was a little longer.

He did not feel like eating, and merely nibbled at the food; then he left to see the doctor, accompanied by the boy who had met him at the station. The doctor said he would come in the evening and reassured them that there was nothing to worry about. Returning home he looked in on his mother again, and then went to the bedroom. He expected Sudha would hand the baby over to Uma and come to him. He eagerly waited for her, but perhaps she was busy with chores. However much he fought to keep awake, sleep overcame. When he opened his eyes it was already evening, and the doctor had just arrived. He examined Paramanand's mother, and said she should keep taking the medicine he had prescribed, that it would take a few more days for her to recover. After the doctor left, Paramanand asked his father whether they should consult a better doctor. Mother was already asleep and Paramanand and Father were on the verandah. Sudha and Uma were in

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the kitchen. Bapu was nowhere to be seen. Paramanand thought this would be an opportunity to have a heart-to-heart talk with his father. "If we go to a better doctor," his father said, "then this one won't come back. It's good of him to come immediately when he's called. The better doctors demand higher fees, and can't always be reached. Let's wait a couple of days, and then decide what to do." Always a few more days, thought Paramanand, but by then he would have gone back. It was as if he had been excluded from family decisions. He was merely a guest for two days; he would go back as he had come. He did not reply to his father's words; it was better not to interfere.

Just as he was about to ask what the problems were with their property in the village two of his friends arrived. When they had heard that he was coming home they had decided they would all spend an evening celebrating together. He tried to put them off, saying he would meet up with them later, but they insisted he accompany them right away. When he went to tell his mother he was going out, she was asleep. He told Sudha that he would not be eating at home that night, took two bottles of rum he had brought with him and left with his friends. They had arranged to meet at the house of another friend, who lived on his own. They all sat together and he felt relieved to get away from the suffocating atmosphere at home. Over rounds of rum they had a good time and by the time Paramanand decided to leave it was already 10 p.m. He reminded his friends they should eat, but no one was in a mood or condition to. Meeting again

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after such a long time they spent their time reminiscing. As Paramanand hurried to leave, one of them asked, "Why are you in such a hurry? Can three years of hunger be satisfied in only one night?" They sat talking and would not let him leave; when he finally returned home it was midnight.

Everyone was asleep; only Father was waiting up. He asked Paramanand if he had eaten. Paramanand felt like talking to him, but it was quite late. He had also drunk a bit too much and was slurring his words, so he simply answered that yes, he had eaten, and went off to bed. The bedroom was dark and the only ray of light filtering in to it was from the verandah. Sudha had fallen asleep, her face turned towards the wall, and Bapu was in the middle of the bed. Slightly irritated, Paramanand changed in the dark and went over to where she was sleeping. He touched her carefully so as not to awake their son, but she was in a deep sleep, perhaps tired from all the work she had had to do that day. He thought of shaking her harder, but as he touched her again her tired face flashed before his eyes. She looked so very tired. With despair and drunkenness as his company, he soon fell asleep.

Towards the early hours of the morning he was in the middle of a dream when the touch of Sudha's hand disturbed his sleep. Shifting the sleeping child towards the wall, she was now in the middle of the bed, trying to wake him up. Reminded of the night before he became angry. He was not sure what he had been dreaming about, only that it was something happy. He was cross with her for disturbing his

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dream. Although he wanted to turn on his side and embrace her, he pretended to be asleep. After attempting once or twice to awaken him Sudha gave up. Paramanand tried in vain to go back to sleep and start dreaming again. Lying there, he hesitated a long time whether to turn on his side, and when at last he did, to take Sudha in his embrace, Bapu woke up and began to cry.

The more Sudha tried to calm him down, and to get him to go to his father, the more he cried. Irritated, Paramanand got up and tried his best to soothe Bapu. When everything failed, Sudha gave him a slap saying he would be the end of her. She led Bapu by the hand out of the room. Paramanand thought Sudha would leave the child in somebody else's care and come back. He waited in bed a long time, but as she did not return he got up to get ready for the day.

His drinking had left him with a hangover and he was afraid he might be sick. It entered his mind that if he was he could ask for more leave and would be able to stay longer. But he knew that that was not possible; he had been warned to be back after a week. He prepared for the day ahead. The first thing to do was to go to the station and book the return ticket. That took more than two hours. Returning home he found his father on his way out to buy medicine. Taking the prescription from him Paramanand set off. On his way back he stopped and had tea at a teashop where he had spent most of his time when he was unemployed. Some of his acquaintances came into the shop and by the time he left for home it was 1 p.m.

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Bapu was playing noisily in the outer room, but he stopped and ran away as soon as he saw his father. However much he might try, Paramanand could not win him over. He had wanted them to become friends before he had to leave. He followed him and at last found him hiding behind Sudha, who tried to make light of it, saying, "He has become quite naughty." Paramanand replied, "You wrote me that he was very quiet, that he went to anybody who called him." Sudha kept mum. Paramanand was reminded of what had happened the day before. When his friends had come Bapu had gone to one of them right away, which had made Paramanand somewhat jealous. Sudha rebuked Bapu for not going to his father. Paramanand's father came in and asked them not to try and force the child, saying he would go to Paramanand on his own once he had got used to him.

Paramanand noticed a lot of changes. The childlike relation between Sudha and Uma, shifting between love and fickleness, no longer existed. Perhaps both of them had matured. His parents seemed to have accepted Sudha, maybe because of their increasing dependence both on her and on the money Paramanand sent regularly. His mother even asked him to take Sudha to see a film, saying that since she had fallen ill Sudha had not been able to get out of the house. Paramanand liked the idea, thinking that at last they would be alone. At first Sudha feigned reluctance but then she agreed to go to a matinee.

After a great deal of difficulty, she escaped from Bapu, leaving Uma to take care of him, and left with Paramanand.

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For the first time since he had arrived home, they were alone. He was still angry about the previous night. On the way to the cinema, he thought of raising the issue, but good sense prevailed when he realised that the differences they had had before would once again raise their head. His feelings under control, he asked, "You couldn't write me even a single letter during the last three years?" "How many did you write to me?" she replied, adding, "How could have I written with so many people in the house? And where would I have got a pen, paper and an envelope? Who would have posted my letter?" Sudha was right. "All right, this time I'll give you some stamped envelopes before I leave," he answered.

"Wouldn't it be better if instead of going to see a film we went somewhere else?" Sudha asked. Paramanand did not disagree; her suggestion showed they were moving closer, but he reminded her that they had said they were going to see a film. What would the family think? "We could tell a lie," suggested Sudha. After mulling it over, he said, "Today we'll go to a show. Tomorrow maybe we'll find some other excuse to go out." On the way to the cinema, Sudha told him all about what was happening in the family. Finally she said, "I'm doing all the talking but you aren't saying anything." "Tomorrow we'll get out of the house at any cost," he answered, "and go and sit somewhere." He thought that during the show Sudha would steal glances at him, whisper something or touch him, but nothing like that happened. Paramanand did not like the film, but Sudha

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was immersed in it, crying and smiling as it went along. The film was tragic, and Sudha was sad when it ended. On the way back home, Paramanand failed to get her to talk to him, no matter how hard he tried.

Once again there was the problem of what to do with Bapu during the night. Bapu insisted that Sudha and he alone, and not Paramanand, would sleep on the bed. Bapu still had not accepted his father and would not go to him. If Paramanand tried to catch hold of him, he would stamp his feet and pull his hands away. Paramanand had given up trying. Now he was creating a problem about sleeping on the bed. Sudha was about to beat him when Paramanand said, "All right, I will sleep on the floor," and he whispered to Sudha, " Once he has fallen asleep, come to me." But it was not that simple. Even if Sudha and Paramanand pretended to be asleep in the dark, Bapu insisted on talking to her. When after a long time he finally fell asleep, Paramanand too was almost asleep. As Sudha joined him, he asked her, "Is he fast asleep?" "Don't say anything", replied Sudha. "He'll wake up." Paramanand got up to check if Bapu was asleep and then returned to Sudha.

There was a lot he wanted to say to her but he was afraid Bapu would wake up, and so he kept silent. However, he forgot everything once Sudha was in his arms, after not having seen her all these years, not having talked to her for so long and having thought of her all this while. At this moment of bliss, Sudha suddenly asked, "Has Bapu woken up?" Both of them fell silent and listened. Bapu was fast

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asleep, yet she went to the bed and patted him. Two minutes later she came back, and Paramanand said, "Oh, today I forgot to go to the bank. Anyway, I'll go tomorrow."

His last day of leave was spent seeing to various errands. A wall of their house was falling in, and his father could not fix it on his own. In the morning Paramanand went to see a contractor friend of his to arrange to have it repaired. Remembering that he had business at the bank, he arrived there at exactly 10 a.m. but the clerks had not yet come in. He also still needed to visit the gentleman who had helped him get his job. He thought that would take only half an hour but the man offered him food, and soon two hours had gone by before he was able to leave. He also spent some time exchanging his mother's medicine at the pharmacist's. His day was spent doing all these things, and it was already evening when he remembered he had told Sudha he would buy her envelopes.

He went to sit by his mother's bed to chat. "You've been going around all day and have to go a long way tomorrow," she said. "Go and have your meal, and go to sleep early." Two minutes later he got up and went to take Bapu on his lap, but the child started to cry. That evening two friends came by again but somehow he managed to see them off early. When at last he went to bed after supper, Bapu had finally fallen asleep on the bed after crying for a long time. Spreading the mat on the floor, he lay down waiting for Sudha, but she was busy preparing food for his journey. After a long time she came in, but first she woke up Bapu to

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feed him, as he had not eaten anything. He refused to eat and would not go back to sleep.

Standing at the door of the train compartment, Paramanand looked at the platform. His parents had not come to the station. Despite his best efforts to attract Bapu's attention the boy deliberately kept his eyes off his father. Balloons, chocolates, toys: nothing had helped bring them closer. Uma stood indifferently against a pillar. In fact, he had hardly talked with her during his stay; it was as if brother and sister had drifted apart. The boy who had accompanied them stood near a magazine stall. Only Sudha looked at him with unblinking eyes. Paramanand felt pointless anger surge up inside him, but also love. He smiled at Sudha, but there was no sign of a smile, or even of sadness on her face. It was as if she had been drained of all emotion. As the bell rang announcing the train's departure, Paramanand looked at the platform one last time. He only saw Sudha. He had to hold on to this last picture in his mind; no one knew for how many more years this time.

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The Outsider

AS SHE WAS ENTERTAINING HER LITERARY FRIENDS IN the sitting room, Roma was hoping Devraj would be late getting home. Sometimes when he arrived and everyone was still there, he would end up embarassing her. She would have to invite him to join them, and as literature was not of much interest to him his comments would often be off the mark. She wished he would just be hospitable, but as head of the family he felt he should take part in everything that went on in the house. Nor was it only Roma who reacted this way; their son and daughter, too, did not appreciate their father getting involved in their affairs all the time. Devraj did not realise this, however, even though their son did not hesitate to speak his mind. If Devraj interfered when his son was talking to friends, he would tell his father to please mind his own business as he did not understand what they were talking about.

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But Roma could not react like that, not just because she was his wife but also because it was Devraj who had made her success possible. She was now an established writer, but at one time she had been a mere housewife. When they were first married they had lived in a narrow lane and Devraj had worked for a contractor. Early in the morning he would leave on his bicycle with his lunch in a tiffin-carrier, and return home late at night. Roma found it hard to manage on his meagre salary, and the birth of two children increased their needs. Her health was not good and she almost had a breakdown. Because of her condition, Devraj wanted to give up his job and start a business of his own. The couple thought this over for a while. Roma felt that a job at least gave them security and insured them a fixed amount at the end of the month, even if it was not very much. She was worried about what would happen if he gave up his job and found no other source of income. Devraj defended his idea. "Not everyone works for someone else," he pointed out. "Many people have their own businesses, no matter how small. I might be jumping from the frying pan into the fire, but if I don't take the leap now I won't ever be able to do it and we'll end up living in misery forever." In the end, despite Roma's repeated protests, Devraj gave up his job and started taking on small contracts himself.

The first few years were difficult and the family was called upon to make sacrifices. It was hard to find jobs, and even once he got them, there could be long delays before he was paid. As a result, he was always in debt, to everyone,

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everywhere: the landlord, shopkeepers, friends, etc. Roma had a hard time meeting the needs of the two children. Yet, Devraj did not look for something else; he kept busy with his small jobs day in and day out. Roma would say that once the children were in school, she would be able to find work to support the family. That hurt Devraj's feelings. Often they would quarrel because of their financial problems, but in the end Devraj would win.

Suddenly and unexpectedly money started to come in. Devraj was able to pay off his debts, they ate well, the children were better dressed. He announced they would move to a bigger rented house. Despite this, Roma was still afraid they might once again become poor. Devraj quietened her fears saying that money breeds money. And so, despite her reluctance, they moved from their small house to a bigger one downtown. Devraj once again overruled Roma and sent their children to the best school in the city. Now he had a motorcycle, and a servant to help in the house.

It was a period of some happiness for Roma, the first time since she had got married that she was comfortably off. She no longer had to do the household chores or take care of the children, and though Devraj worked harder, he was less irritable than before. Financial security had brought a more tranquil atmosphere to the house. Roma owed everything to Devraj and was suitably grateful. The life she now lived was something she could not have imagined before. They no longer quarrelled; instead, she spent every minute taking care of him. The only thing she was unhappy

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about was that she did not have enough to keep her occupied. When she could not decide what to do, it was Devraj who showed her the way. Roma was the more educated of the two, but they never brought up this possibly embarassing topic. Now Devraj himself suggested that she should finish her M.A., after all these years, since she now had more time on her hands. Although Roma protested, he bought her all the books, and Roma was herself surprised to discover she was interested in reading them.

Devraj gave his motorcycle to his business manager and bought a car. They moved into a larger house, where Roma could have a study of her own. Since the children were now grown up, she was able to devote more time to her studies, while the servants took care of the household chores. Devraj's business was going well; he had a manager he could trust. He would come back home early, but he and Roma no longer spent as much time together, going over everything that had happened during the day. Now Roma and the children were busy with their studies, and Devraj did not want to disturb them. So, he would stay out late even if he did not have anything specific to do. He joined various clubs, where he would go and drink, and he began to make friends. That year of Devraj's life went well. The children were successful in their studies, getting good grades, and they moved into their own house once it was built. The happiest thing for Devraj was that Roma got a first class in her M.A.

When they moved into the new house, Devraj's friends insisted he give a house-warming party. Devraj and Roma

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sat down to prepare a list of all their friends, new as well as old. They took two days over it so as not to leave out a single person. They felt as close to each other as they had been years before, when they were not so well off. The party was held out on their lawn, and it went well. Devraj had ordered the best liquor and the food was good. Many important people came, and Devraj and Roma were able to meet some of their old friends again. Everyone seemed happy with the party, congratulating Roma on her M.A. and Devraj on his success. Once the guests had left, Roma went to her room, leaving Devraj on the lawn with some of his close friends.

By then the children were asleep. Even though she was tired, Roma went to her study upstairs instead of going to bed. This was the place she loved the most. While the rest of the house belonged to everyone, this room was her very own, where she could lose herself in her books. She felt grateful to Devraj for giving her this new life. She looked out of the window, and could see him sitting with his friends on the lawn, glasses in hand, talking loudly. She could hear what they were saying as clearly as if they had been in the next room. She looked at Devraj with gratitude and pride. He was telling their friends how he had arranged for the expensive foreign liquor for the party. They were telling him how to get it more easily. Then their conversation drifted towards the quality and strength of different brands of whiskey. If one of them liked one brand, then another liked a different one. They talked about liquors whose effect was

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immediate and others whose punch was delayed. She could not bear to listen to such talk; instead, she took a book off the shelf and immersed herself in her reading. After some time, when she again turned her attention to their conversation, she realized they were still on the same subject. Then, they shifted to how to get on the good side of the city engineers. There was one engineer who was delaying approval of the contractor's bills, and they all suggested possible solutions. They agreed that the engineer could be bribed with money and liquor, while one of them thought that the engineer's real weakness was women. Roma closed her book and got up to go to bed.

As she waited for Devraj, she could not fall asleep. She had expected them to celebrate the success of their party, but she gave up on that. Lying on the bed, she thought about the turn her life had taken. Everything—Devraj's business, the children's studies, the household—was going well. When she had gone back to university, things had changed, a passage to another world had opened up for her. She had learned to analyse herself. Everything—her own life, her surroundings—increasingly seemed trivial. Devraj, whom she had worshipped as a God, now seemed to her unsophisticated and crude, a philistine. She rebuked herself for harbouring such thoughts, but remembering the conversation she had overheard between her husband and his friends she could not put them out of her mind. She knew she should be grateful to Devraj. How many wives had been given such opportunities? She decided to wait up

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for Devraj to come to bed and to show him how grateful she was for all he had done. But, instead, when he finally came up and placed his hand on her, she pretended to be asleep. As always he was attentive to her wishes, and turned on his side, going to sleep without disturbing her.

Once again it was Devraj who first realised that boredom was setting in once she had finished her studies. Although literature did not interest him particularly he read magazines and kept abreast of politics; he was certainly much gentler and politer than his friends. One evening he gave her a package, saying, "What use will your studies have been if you sit at home doing nothing? You should put your knowledge to use. People less educated than you write, you should write too." Unwrapping the package, Roma discovered a large notebook, bound in leather. Jokingly she said, "A writer also needs a pen!" The very next day Devraj bought her the most expensive pen available in the market.

Roma herself had not realized she wanted a pen and paper, nor had she recognized the talent she, in fact, had. That night she started writing and completed a poem on the first page of the notebook. The next morning the first thing she did was to go to her study and go through the poem again, changing a few words and rearranging two lines. Rereading the poem, she was filled with joy. It was not bad; it could be published! She thought of reading it to Devraj, but he often came home late or was busy, and she could not wait. That very day she sent it off to a magazine and began work on her next one. At the first opportunity,

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she showed him her notebook. He was having a drink of water. Putting down the glass, he wiped his hands, took the notebook and carefully opened the pages. He read all the poems patiently, although he did not understand much. Roma had hoped he would say something about them, but his only remark was, "Write a few more so that you'll have a book." Roma was disappointed by his lack of comment on the poems themselves.

The day the magazine featuring her poem arrived in the mail she was overjoyed. She showed it to her children, but they were not impressed. They were studying at English medium schools, and gave little importance to literature in regional languages. But since it was their mother's writing, they took a quick look at her work and gave her back the magazine. She waited for Devraj to get home to show it to him. Seeing the poem in print, he was even happier than she was. He immediately told all his friends and bought ten copies of the magazine.

The more passionate Roma became about her writing, the further apart she grew from her family. Nevertheless, Devraj continued to support her. Spending more time at home, he helped her free herself from household chores. The children were both studying at college; they had their own friends and did not want anyone to intrude into their private worlds. Because of this, they were glad their mother was busy with her writing. Devraj, for his part, had given up his habit of poking his nose into their affairs; nothing he said was welcomed by his children, and at times they would

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even answer him back. Sometimes this made him feel bad, but he never said anything to Roma. He wanted her to pursue her career and become famous. Her persistence paid off and slowly her popularity as a writer grew; encouraged, she continued with her writing, filling up all the pages of the notebook he had given her with poems.

Roma realised she had been neglecting Devraj. Her only grievance was that he would read her poems but not say anything about them. She showed him everything she wrote and the magazines where her work was published. Once, Devraj was just about to leave for work when Roma brought him a poem she had just completed. "Please have a look at it," she said, "I'm sending it off today." Devraj glanced at his watch. He would have sat down had he had a little more time, but he had to meet the engineer to receive payment on a bill which had been due for a long time. If he was not there on time payment might be put off once again. "I'll be home early," he answered, "but send it off anyway."

As promised, Devraj came home early. When he asked Roma about her poem, she became angry. "You never wanted me to become a writer," she complained. "You only pretend to encourage me; you're actually jealous of me." Despite the unfairness of the outburst, Devraj did not lose his temper. Instead, he begged her forgiveness for not having been able to read her poem that morning. Holding her hands in his, he sat opposite her. "I know you've every reason to be cross with me," he said, "but I have to run the house. You show me whatever you write, but who am I to

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comment on your poems? You know what a poor education I had. What can I tell you about them? When you show me your poems, I go through them to please you. But what good to you is that sort of reading?" Roma was still angry: "You buy and read all the magazines and yet you can't understand my short poems?" "I just turn the pages of the magazines," he replied, "but you're not writing for readers like me. You write for people who understand and appreciate literature." When he saw she was not yet convinced, he moved over beside her. "If instead of literature you had studied physics and written articles on that, would I have been able to understand them?" he asked. "But would I have been any less proud that my wife was an eminent physicist?" As her anger subsided, he asked her if she had sent the poem in. "No, you haven't seen it," she replied, "so I haven't sent it in." " That's alright," he replied. "It doesn't matter if it isn't in the special issue. You now have enough poems for a book of your own." The thought of having a book published brightened her mood. Embracing Devraj, she asked, "Do you mean that?"

Putting aside all his other work, Devraj got busy making arrangements for her book to be published, deciding which press would do the best job, what size it should be to look nice, which well-known artist should do the cover, and so forth. The afternoon he arrived home with the book, tired and drenched in sweat, she embraced him and would not let him leave the house the rest of the day. He kept returning to the dedication: "To Devraj, the inspiration for all my

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poems." He was overjoyed, and put as much effort and attention into arranging the function at which the book would be launched. The ceremony was well-managed, graced by the minister of culture and by renowned writers. There was a large audience. From the discussion and speeches both Roma and Devraj were convinced that Roma's success as a writer had been confirmed.

The book was well-received by readers and critics, and Roma now devoted herself entirely to her writing. Besides poetry, she started writing fiction, and letters asking to publish her work arrived from different editors. Devraj assured her that her next book would be even better produced, no matter what the expense. Roma had become a well-established writer. But in addition to writing, a writer has also to live the life of a writer. This involved wearing the right clothes, being seen with the right writers, carrying around the latest book by a famous foreign writer, becoming absentminded for no particular reason, and so on. Roma soon acquired all these qualities and became 'the complete writer'. She got to know other writers, and, gradually, with the open hospitality she offered at home, she became the centre of the writers' community in the city. Devraj was happy about this as it raised his social standing. He now saw himself not so much as Roma's husband, but as a patron of the literary arts.

Initially, when writers first came to the house, Roma wanted Devraj to come home early to join them. And so he would, but gradually he lost interest in their discussions.

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Writers spend all their time discussing literature, as if nothing else in the world matters. One day, on his way back home, Devraj was trapped in a communal riot, but that evening when he told Roma's friends about what had happened, no one took an interest; their only concerns were who would get next year's award, who belonged to which clique, who was whose ghost-writer, ... One day, when talk veered around to this last topic, Devraj ventured to comment, "It doesn't matter who actually wrote Shakespeare's plays, as long as they are Shakespeare's." He had read this in some magazine that morning, but did not realise that no matter how wise a person might be, if he is not a writer himself he has no right to trespass into the world of literature. No sooner had he uttered these words than everyone fell silent. Roma gave him an angry look.

Of late, Devraj had been thinking about not joining them at all, but that was not possible since the writers themselves would ask him to. They had their own reasons for that; if Roma was alone, they would be served tea, but if Devraj was there then they had a chance to have a drink. It seemed as if literature had something to do with alcohol, for after a couple of drinks the discussions would become emotional and even the shyest and quietest poet, who would usually sit in one corner, would become loquacious. That is why Devraj's presence was more important to Roma's friends than to Roma herself. One evening, in the course of a conversation, Devraj said, "It's a pity there hasn't been another Rabindranath in India." An aged novelist

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vehemently objected to the statement, taking it, perhaps, as a personal insult. Seeing the look on Roma's face, Devraj did not say anything else. After a couple of minutes, everyone suddenly became afraid that Devraj might not serve them drinks that evening. The novelist changed subjects, and praised Devraj's idea. Everyone joined in, in unison.

It is true that Devraj did not know anything about literature, but he knew these writers inside out. The reason for their sudden change of opinion was clear to him. He immediately made arrangements for them to be served drinks, but after sitting with them for a while he left for his room.

That day when he arrived home in the evening he could see that, as usual, Roma's friends were there, caught up in animated conversation. He had had a hard day, and felt tired. He was of no mind to join them. Closing the gate behind him he went to the back of the house and let himself in. Loud music was coming from his son's room and his daughter had shut herself up with her friends. Without disturbing them he prepared himself a drink in the dining room. Raising the glass, he examined the colour of the liquor. He felt very tired and depressed. So he poured himself some more whisky and took the glass to the bedroom. Just as he was about to touch the glass to his lips he noticed Roma's poetry notebook lying on the bed. Seeing it renewed his love for her. Sipping his drink, he decided that her next book would be even more beautifully produced.

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Homeless

HIS TEA FINISHED, BIBHU THREW THE CLAY CUP AGAINST the ground, and stood up, straightening the cotton bag slung over his shoulder. No sooner had he stepped into the corridor than the train gave a jolt. But Bibhu knew the train's every movement. Unperturbed, he stepped over and around the people crowding the corridor and went on into another compartment, which was quite empty. People say that trains, no matter where they are headed, no matter at what time of the day, are always packed. But Bibhu knew that there are sometimes empty seats. When they are, other hawkers might not do good business, but Bibhu could still sell his books. If the trains were not too crowded, passengers had time to browse and Bibhu got a chance to talk to them. He looked around the compartment and sat down opposite a Bengali couple. Taking a thick Bengali book from his bag, he handed it to them, saying, "You might not have heard of him, but this writer's promising." Leafing through a few

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pages, the man handed the book to his wife. Reading their faces, Bibhu knew what kind of books they would be interested in. He took out another, this time something popular. As expected, the man bought it. Taking his money, Bibhu wondered for a second whether he should talk to them or move on. The woman was beautiful. She wore an expensive sari and jewellery, but did not seem particularly fond of books. Bibhu got up to leave.

Bibhu's friends often asked him whether he ever got bored spending his life on trains day after day. How could they know that trains were worlds unto themselves? What could people whose lives were spent at the office, at home, in the market or with neighbours know about a world where life went by surrounded by strangers. Each new day brought new wonders. Would tomorrow's train be the same as today's? Each train not only runs through new countryside and new surroundings, it also runs with a new purpose. Even the passengers who spend the night in the train are not their old selves the next morning. Yet, Bibhu would not tell his friends all these things. Instead, he would just laugh away their questions and say, "You all live in cities; trains are my city."

There is nothing that happens in life that does not also happen on trains. In a decade of nomadic life—no, why 'nomadic'; trains are his home—Bibhu had seen everything, and then some flirtations, love affairs, emotional breakups, business negotiations, theft, rape, murder: he had had the fortune, or misfortune, of seeing them all. A chill would run

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down his spine whenever he thought back to one particular event. The train had passed through the last big junction, and everyone was getting ready to go to sleep after dinner. Bibhu had decided to make one last round. He was crossing from a compartment into the chair car when he met a middle-aged lady standing in the doorway. She took a chocolate from a glass jar and gave it to him. He popped it into his mouth. She took out another for someone behind him. He looked around to see who was there. There was no one. When he turned back, the lady too had disappeared. A shiver ran through him. He entered the chair car and saw that everyone was in their seat, but the lady was nowhere to be seen. Nor was she in the nearby compartments. Terrified, he went to the attendant, a friend, and told him what had happened. His friend was surprised, "A middle-aged woman in the chair car?" He took the list of passengers from his pocket. There were three ladies in their forties on the list. Bibhu took note of their seat numbers and went to their places to check. The woman who had given him a chocolate was not one of them. He thought that perhaps he had only imagined everything, but he still had the taste of chocolate in his mouth. He went back to the attendant, who calmed him down, telling him to go to sleep and that things would be fine in the morning.

During the years he had spent on the trains, he had become friends with many of the railway staff. They allowed him free passage, took care of his books, and, when he needed it, lent him money. They were like members of his

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family. Sometimes someone going off duty would invite him to stay the night, and occasionally he would accept. On their way home Bibhu would sometimes buy a bottle of liquor, if a shop was open, and they would talk late into the night in the small quarters in the housing development for railway employees. Such times were only an extension of his life on the trains, since the house would be close to the rail line. All through the night trains ran through his sleep, and his bed shook as if he were sleeping in a compartment.

The only change from this life came when he went to his sister's house in her village. She was his only living relative. She lived far away and Bibhu often grumbled because she did not live next to a rail line. His sister's children liked him and lovingly called him 'Barabula Mamu' or only 'Bula Mamu'—'wandering uncle'. As long as he was there, he felt close to them and to the villagers, and would share in the household chores. But hardly would a week go by than he would become impatient to be back at work. He would grow silent, and they would know that he was about to leave the village. The children would comment that their uncle had been bitten by the bug. Once he was off, there would be no news from him; he never wrote. They had given up complaining long ago, but they knew that one fine morning he would come back, and after a week or so go on his way again.

While in the village, he would help his sister's children with their studies. One day his sister asked him to stay on a little longer, until his nephew Dipu's examination was over.

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The request alarmed Bibhu; it was a ploy to keep him there. He declined, saying he had already stayed a week even though he had come only for a day, adding that he had a lot of work to do. His brother-in-law asked, somewhat incredulously, "What work?" Bibhu became serious and replied, "You don't know how difficult my work is. I have to settle accounts with the bookshops or else they won't give me books on credit. And my things are with different guards and conductors on different trains. All that has to be taken care of." Here, his sister chipped in, "Why should you do this kind of business? You could live with us, or we could build a house for you nearby, with the money you've deposited with us. If you'd feel ashamed sitting and doing nothing, you could help your brother-in-law in the fields." "Take up some other kind of work at my age!" he answered, "I don't think I'd be good at anything else. I'm quite happy selling books on the train." His reply had irritated his sister. "Why don't you just say you like living in railway stations and eating platform food?" she remarked. "You're right," Bibhu calmly replied. "How can you sleep if your bed doesn't shake? And what do you know about the food the hawkers sell? Next time I'll bring some for everyone."

That was how Bibhu would turn down her requests. Before, his brother-in-law used to tease him, saying, "Once he finds a woman, he'll stay home." But that time was long past. No one had succeeded in convincing him to get married. Now it would be difficult to find a bride for him. Once, when a girl from the village was back home after

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having become a widow after only a few months of marriage, it had almost come about. She was very quiet and also beautiful, and everyone was full of praise for her. Bibhu's brother-in-law and sister insisted that he should at least go and meet her. Though unwilling, he was taken to her house, and, in fact, she had appealed to him. She spoke in a quiet but steady voice of having been tortured by her in-laws after her husband's death. Bibhu liked everything about her. On their way home, his brother-in-law suggested he should agree to this proposal immediately. "We've known her ever since she was a child," he said. "You'd be lucky to have her as your wife." The girl's simple and solemn face flashed before Bibhu's eyes. Did he have any right to marry her, given his life of wandering? But that was not his real worry. He was afraid of being tied down. He would have to be in the village all the time; that was what bothered him. Once married, how would he be able to leave her to do his work? What would happen to his life on the trains? He could not imagine being chained in a house. He did not give his answer immediately, but once back at work he wrote to say he would not get married. That was his last marriage offer.

Of course, it was not that he did not like the companionship of women. Sometimes, along with his friends, he would spend a night in Sonagachhi. The madame of the house they went to was an old, gentle and pious woman. Her girls were also simple and sweet. The place was not free from drunks and goons, but for Bibhu it was a place to relax.

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There was liquor and cheap food, brought in from the outside. He would sleep there peacefully once the crowd thinned out after midnight, and in the morning he was back on the trains once again. For some years now Bibhu has been frequenting the place with a friend of his. The friend had a woman he saw regularly, named Meena, and they had paired Bibhu off with Arati, Meena's friend. Bibhu and Arati were now quite friendly, and they shared their joys and sorrows. Once Arati's eight-year-old son had come from the village to the city, and Bibhu had spent a day taking him around and showing him the sights. Life continued in this way, but once Bibhu was not able to go and see Arati for a couple of days. When he finally did, he found her sullen and silent; she started crying and would not stop until she had extracted a promise that he would come and see her every other day. Once he had left her that night, he never went back again.

His sister was always warning him, "That's alright. You're young now and don't need anyone's help. But if you fall sick, who will take care of you?" He was well aware of the problem. Once he had taken ill and was lying on the platform. A railway employee took him home, and he stayed there for four days. After that he had vowed that if ever he fell sick again he would go some place where no one knew him; he did not want to cause his acquaintances any trouble. He had had plenty of similar experiences on the trains. Sometimes he had seen passengers who were dying with no one to help them; sometimes, even, bodies were found on

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the train. One time an unidentified body lay on a small platform for two days. Bibhu knew what he wanted for himself: to lie down one night in a train only to be taken out the next morning as a corpse, creating no problems and causing no inconvenience to anybody.

But why should he entertain such unpleasant thoughts, especially when he was in good health? His days were going well. This very morning he had already sold two books. He had gone into a compartment and stood near a man who was reading. A strange rule is that only someone who already owns books buys more. The man put down the one he was reading, took Bibhu's books and looked at them all, one after another, asking him if he had a title or two he wanted. Perhaps so as not to disappoint Bibhu, he bought an inexpensive book. A woman sitting nearby asked Bibhu if he had children's books. Looking at the child accompanying her, he guessed her age, and said, "I'll be back with some children's books in fifteen minutes," mentally taking note of her seat as he left. In the next compartment, there were four people playing cards on a trunk set between two seats. He stood next to them, watching them play. One of the players got up and handed his cards to Bibhu, asking him to play his hand, saying he would be back in a few minutes. Very soon Bibhu was caught up in the game. When the player returned, Bibhu tried to give him back the cards, but the player insisted that he should finish the game.

By the time Bibhu returned from the end of the train with the new books, the child was crying. Giving the mother

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a book, he tried to console the child but she would not listen to him. Bibhu showed her things going past the window, showed her pictures in the book, but nothing seemed to please her. At last he took his handkerchief out of his pocket, rolled it into the shape of a mouse and made it move along his palm. As she watched, the child finally stopped crying but would not leave her mother's lap. When the mother chose a book for her, she threw it on the floor. Even after Bibhu picked it up she would not take it. The mother gave him his money and said, "Don't worry about her; what she needs is a good spanking."

That evening the mother and daughter got off the train as Bibhu was having tea on the platform. The child was smiling. Seeing Bibhu, the mother pointed him out to her, "Look at your book-seller uncle. He tried so hard to stop you from crying. Say hello to him before we leave." The daughter took her hands out of her mother's saree and folded them in a greeting, but she shied away when Bibhu looked at her. As the train was scheduled to stop there for quite a long time, he thought of seeing them off outside the platform. But his feet did not budge. What use was there in continuing such a relationship? There had been many other pleasant relationships in his life, but he had never followed up on any of them. People would offer him jobs; others, sales agencies. Once he met a man with a letter from his brother-in-law. The letter said that if Bibhu would marry the man's widowed sister he would receive all their property. There had been many proposals like this, but he had declined

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them all. What would he do with money? His life, as it was, was fine. What use would it be to become tied down to anything, whether a home, money, or even love.

If he had not met her again a few days later, he would not have remembered her face. On the train he would make friends with many people but once he got off he would forget them all. Someone would tell him they had met five years before and that he had sold him a certain book at half its price, while another would say, "You look exactly the same as you did last year. Instead of books you should be selling the medicine you take to stay young." Many such kind words. That day Bibhu was loitering on the platform when he met the mother and daughter again. There was a young woman with them, and they were inside a compartment. After some time, the woman and her daughter got off the train and the mother was talking to the young woman through the train window. While Bibhu was still trying to decide whether to go over to them or not, the little girl smiled at him. He had to go and see her. Greeting him, the woman said, "I'm lucky to have come across you. My sister is travelling on the train. I am worried as she has never travelled on her own. I've written to my brother to meet her at the station. Please keep an eye on her." Bibhu looked inside the compartment. There was a girl in her early twenties, looking completely lost. After some time the woman asked Bibhu to come near the window as her sister was not able to see him properly. "Even at her age Rumi is afraid of everything," she said. When Bibhu went closer to

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the window, Rumi asked, "Where is your seat?" "Don't worry", he said, "I'll be in your compartment."

As the train started to move, he went over to her and said, "Wait here; I'll be back soon." "How can I stay on my own?" she asked. Making room for him she asked him to sit down. He did, and after some time thought of going to get his bag of books. Rumi was looking out the window. After ten minutes or so, when he was about to get up, she said, "I'm thirsty." Seizing the opportunity, he got up and offered to go and get her something to drink. He went to the conductor's compartment and put some books in his bag. Remembering that Rumi had asked for something to drink, he put down the books, picked up a bottle of water and took it to her. "What took you so long just to get me some water?" she asked. Taking a sip, she said, "The water tastes bad. Isn't there any orange drink on the train? I have some money with me." Bibhu smiled. "Take the water," he said, "you can have some orange drink at the next station." When Bibhu started to leave, Rumi asked him where he was going. "My business is selling books," he answered. "I have to make my rounds and try to sell some." "Show me your books," she said, "I'll buy one." Taking one book after another out of his bag, Rumi looked at them all. Finally choosing one, she said, "This one; how much is it?"

"Thirty-three rupees. But, thirty for you." "Thirty rupees! Who can afford such a price? Why don't you sell film magazines? I'd buy one." After some time Bibhu said, "Stay here, I'll be back soon. If I don't sell any books, how will I

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be able to eat?" She answered, "I'll take you to my brother's house. You can eat there. Once you've eaten something cooked by my sister-in-law you won't forget the taste. How much do you earn from your book-selling?"

"No set amount. One month's sales can be good, another's bad. If sales are bad, I have to go without food."

"I know what you should do. When you earn more money one month, save something from that for the future. That will support you the months you earn less. Don't you have enough common sense to do that?"

"Alright. From now on I'll put my money in a bank. Do you know of any banks?"

"What do I know about banks? You're grown-up and still you don't know where the banks are? If you lived near our house, I could have showed you one. Where do you live?"

"Me? On the trains."

"How wonderful! You can go wherever you want! Whenever you feel like it, you can get off at a station, have something to eat and drink orange juice!"

At that moment, the ticket collector entered the compartment. He knew Bibhu. Seeing him, the collector said, "The book you gave me last time was trash. I'll give it back to you tomorrow." Since Bibhu was talking to someone, Rumi looked out of the window. She was not listening, and did not hear the collector when he asked her twice for her ticket. Poking her, Bibhu told her to show her ticket. Without looking away from the window, she gave him her

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purse, saying, "The ticket is inside." He fished the ticket out from a mess of crumpled notes, a handkerchief, coins and keys. After it had been checked he gave her back the purse. "Keep it," she said. "I might lose it." When the train reached the next station, Bibhu noticed she was not listening to him. She seemed to be sulking. When he asked if anything was wrong, she turned away. Bibhu kept silent, thinking that she would settle down after a bit. As expected, Rumi soon opened her mouth. "You promised to buy me orange juice at the station," she said. When Bibhu got up, smiling to himself, she added, "I gave you my purse for safe keeping, and now you're leaving it behind! What if it were stolen? Take it with you."

For the rest of the journey, Rumi did not allow Bibhu to leave her side, talking to him all the time. Not only did he have to tell her everything about his life, but he also had to listen to everything she told him about hers. He learned who her enemies were, which teachers were not very good, what kind of man she would like to marry, which film star was her favourite, and so on. When she finally reached her station Rumi insisted that Bibhu go with her—whether her brother was at the station to meet them or not—to her brother's house and have dinner.

Getting off the train that evening they looked around, but Rumi could not see her brother anywhere. Maybe, he had not yet turned up to meet her, since the train, which was usually late, had arrived on time. Bibhu had her sit on a bench, put her luggage beside her and gave her back her

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purse. Telling her he would try to find her brother, he went to the bridge over the tracks and looked back to where she was sitting. She was busy reading a film magazine she had bought.

No, there was no question of his going to her brother's house. But what if her brother did not come to get her? He was in a fix. He saw a man approaching her. Oh, what a relief! But Rumi did not get up. After talking to her, the gentlemen moved down the platform; he seemed to be looking for someone else.

Bibhu carefully came down the steps. Without looking over towards where she was sitting, he sneaked away to the other side of the platform, where there was a train facing in the opposite direction. Looking back, he saw Rumi still sitting on her own. He turned away and looked inside the train. He saw a child sitting in the compartment with a game board asking his father to play, but his father was busy talking to someone. The whistle went signalling that the train was about to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, Bibhu noticed Rumi's brother approaching her and that Rumi was standing up. As the train started moving, Bibhu jumped on to the train. He went into the compartment where the boy was, and said, "Come on, I'll play with you." He sat down and looked out of the window. He no longer could see Rumi and her brother.

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Radha

AFTER A FEW MINUTES IN SILENCE, SUMIT PATTED RADHA on the shoulder. "Your parents certainly chose the right name for you," he said. "You mean, I'm a loose woman," replied Radha. She was not asking a question, nor was she angry. In fact, Sumit had never seen Radha angry. Maybe she did not always like what he said, but she never became cross with him. She would begin all her sentences with, "You mean . . . ." Once, at the beginning of their relationship Sumit had remarked, "Had I known I wouldn't be in control, I wouldn't have let us become this close." "You mean, I'm a stupid woman," Radha had replied. Sumit remembered what she had said and would repeat it every now and then to tease her. "You really are stupid," he would say. This time, though, he answered, "What do you mean, a loose woman? Radha's not a loose woman, Radha's a goddess!"

Radha was naked, lying on top of him. Hearing him say that, she laughed. She placed her hands on his chest and

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arched her back, "You've got that right! I'm glad you've finally found out who I really am." "Please get off my chest," Sumit answered. "You're suffocating me." "Once you admit I'm a goddess," added Radha, "you'll have to bring me offerings. Be thankful I don't have ten hands."

Radha always took things lightly; she never made demands or expressed any grievances. She was never a burden. Thinking of Radha, Sumit was reminded of earlier relationships, which had not gone as smoothly or easily. He thought especially of Sharada; their relationship had become unbearable. Sharada had loved him, that was certain, but with a love whose possessiveness had suffocated him. Once, he remembered, Sharada had knit a sweater for him. Time after time she had made him stand up and turn around, so she could get the measurements right. She knit the sweater with so much love and care that it seemed to Sumit she was not only knitting him a sweater but creating a prison.

Sharada was excessive in everything. He felt hemmed in by her every move. The day the sweater was finished, he had to try it on. As expected, he felt as if he had been confined to a windowless cell. He took the sweater off in a hurry. "I poured my love into my knitting," Sharada complained, "and yet you've taken the sweater off right away." "It's not cold," he replied. "Lucky for you then that it's not summer. If I'd finished it in summer, you'd still have had to put it on." And Sumit knew she meant it.

Sharada always wanted to take over his life. She would say, "There's no difference between you and me. You

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shouldn't think of me as a separate person; I'm only a part of you." She always got her way. She would decide what Sumit would wear, what he would have for breakfast and for lunch, where he would go. Even when he went for a hair-cut, she would go with him and decide how short his hair should be trimmed. Once Sumit had gone to a restaurant with a client. When he told her where they had eaten Sharada blew up. "Don't you remember we went there when we were getting to know each other? You can't go there with someone else."

Whatever freedom Sumit had had as a bachelor, Sharada had put an end to it. At first he had thought she gave him a purpose in life, that life without her meant nothing. Later on, though, he couldn't spend more than a couple of minutes with her. Every minute away would have to be recounted in great detail and if she heard anything she didn't like, she would fret and fume. In the beginning, Sumit hid nothing from her; but as time went by he became selective, telling her only what would not upset her, even resorting to lies.

Sharada was the first true love of his life, a life that had been adrift, barely affecting him. She had come to consult him professionally. Separated from her husband she wanted to fight the divorce. From what she told him, her husband seemed mean and nasty. Sumit had asked, "If your husband is such a monster, why not agree to a divorce?" "To teach him a lesson," was what she replied. Through testimony, fair and foul, her husband was shown to be cruel and wicked, and the allegations he had brought against her—desertion

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and mental cruelty—were proven untrue. When Sharada knew her husband had lost she told Sumit that now she was willing to divorce him. A strange move, yet Sumit managed it, and Sharada won a good settlement.

The relationship that had begun this way developed on Sharada's initiative; in due course, she took full control over his life. After a few days of happiness, he grew impatient with her nagging. It came to the point that she wanted him to live for both of them and not only for himself. From then on, their meetings would always end with Sharada complaining and Sumit attempting to pacify her. One day, he found her sitting outside her house holding a bag. It contained everything he had ever given her. Back inside, she confronted him: " I know you want to leave me. That's why I've put all these things together, to return them to you." More out of irritation than sadness, he took the bag. "Alright," he said. Standing facing him, Sharada continued, "Do you think you can mess up peoples' lives just like that? What about my life, which you've spoiled? I'll commit suicide and leave a note saying you're responsible." Snatching back the bag, she added, "And all these things will burn on my pyre." Beside himself, he blurted out, "Go ahead; commit suicide, but don't bother me any more," and left the house. She followed him out. As he was about to get into his car, she bent down and grasped his feet right in the middle of the street, beseeching him to forgive her and to come back into the house. Sumit went back in, but for the very last time.

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For days, Sharada made Sumit's life miserable, calling him constantly on the phone, coming to his house, writing him letters, sending messages through friends. He tried everything—disconnecting the telephone, tearing up her letters without reading them, not answering her knocks on his door—and when nothing worked he left the city for a month. This was how he managed to put an end to their relationship, or rather how he succeeded in freeing himself from her clutches. The year and a half he had spent with her seemed to him more like half a lifetime.

But is it that easy to free oneself of such a woman? It frightened him to think she might barge back into his life at any moment and take control once again. It seemed as if Sharada was invisibly keeping watch over everything he did. He was mortally afraid to enter into another relationship for fear he might choose another woman like her. When any of his women friends asked him for anything, he would become extremely guarded. Even a simple question, like where he had been, reminded him of her, and he would think up different answers so as not to be criticised. He would compare his relationships to that with Sharada and would not allow them to develop. It was at such a crucial time that Radha came into his life.

Thinking of Radha, he was reminded of the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. There was absolutely no weight of any kind in his relationship with Radha; it was absolute lightness. But can lightness also be unbearable? That frightened him and he tried to force the thought from

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his mind. Of course, at first he had a hard time accepting Radha. He took her to be another Sharada and behaved accordingly. But Radha dispelled his fears, quickly and easily. A few days after they met she offered to come to his house and cook for him. She prepared the food in the morning and when he sat down for lunch, he stopped eating after one spoonful. The food was not edible, but he remembered Sharada and thought he should pretend to enjoy it. Once Sharada had given him some medicine to take, but the doctor advised him to take another. At that stage in their relationship he was not yet lying to Sharada, so when she asked him if he had taken the medicine he told her the truth. Sharada went red in the face: "I gave you some medicine and you threw it away? Didn't you think my medicine would cure you?" And she had gone on, haranguing him for half an hour. So Sumit kept on eating without saying anything. Seeing his expression, Radha realised the food was not good. She took a spoonful, and made a face. "How can you eat this stuff?" she asked, "Can't you taste how bad it is? How can you eat it? Let's go out somewhere." Sharada would have said, "I cooked it. You've got to eat it, no matter what it tastes like."

He knew he should not compare Radha to Sharada in every little thing, but no matter how hard he tried he could not get Sharada out of his mind. Even many years later Sharada would still get on his nerves. Whenever he told Radha what Sharada had done, she would say, "She must have had some problem you weren't able to understand.

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She wasn't angry with you; no, she was angry with herself. You were merely a focus for her anger." Another time, when he said something about Sharada, Radha asked him, "Were you afraid of your mother when you were a child?" This question had nothing to do with Sharada but he was reminded of an incident when Sharada had taken him to task. He had felt like a child, as if his mother was standing there beside him, scolding him.

His introduction to Radha had been easy. His previous relationships had all required a great deal of time, effort, and strategy, causing him anxiety, doubt and mental torture. In the case of Radha, though, she had befriended him from the very first day they met. It was she who had made the first move; he had not had to take the initiative. Although they lived in the same city Sumit had not met her or her husband, though Radha was quite well-known as a social worker. Once Sumit had gone to Calcutta in connection with a court case. After he had finished his work he had gone to an art gallery to spend some time before going back to his hotel. Walking through the exhibition, glancing at the paintings, he found Radha immersed in one of them. When he made another round, Radha handed him a catalogue and said, "Read the descriptions of the paintings. You'll understand and like them better." To his surprise, he discovered meanings where he had found none before. As he went around the gallery he caught sight of Radha sitting on a bench on the lawn. On his way out he introduced himself and thanked her. Radha had come to her sister's

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house in the city a few days earlier and was glad to discover they were from the same city. They walked to a restaurant as they talked and decided to go to another exhibition the following day.

Sumit had finished the work he had to do and was scheduled to leave, but he decided to stay on because of Radha. That evening he was reminded of Sharada; he thought of ringing Radha up to say he would not be staying on. Then he remembered Radha's face and the time they had spent together. She had been very gentle; her words were sweet and thoughtful. She had none of the arrogance he usually noticed in women when first introduced to them. At this point in his life he was lonely and looking for a stable relationship. He stayed another three days, only for her. Those three days were for him an initiation into a new life. At their second meeting, without asking Sumit anything about himself, she opened her life up to him, telling him all about herself, her husband, her children, her likes and dislikes, her whole life. Sumit, though, was not sure how much of his life he wanted to reveal to Radha, afraid that if he told her about his past he would lose her. So he preferred to keep quiet, telling her only about his professional career and about his life when he was unattached. Radha did not try to find out more from him. Sumit thought to himself, I'll tell her just so much, of what use would it be for her to know more about my past?

But in the end, lying on the bed, Sumit told her everything. He planned to leave the following day in the evening. As they were saying good night, Radha said there

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was no sense visiting more exhibitions in the heat; instead, they could spend the day in Sumit's hotel room. Her remark astonished Sumit; he knew how difficult it usually was to get a woman to come to a hotel room and what devious strategies were required. That night he tossed and turned; Radha was on his mind. As his day began he was already waiting for her to arrive, afraid she might not turn up. Of course, he was used to waiting around hopelessly, and so, even if she was not yet due to arrive, he had already abandoned all hope. Just then the doorbell rang.

Sumit opened the door and took Radha into his arms. He did not understand why a few tears were suddenly trickling down his cheeks. Radha no doubt noticed them but said nothing. She quietly sat down on the sofa, and, taking off her sandals, made herself comfortable. "I'm glad we didn't go out today. The heat's unbearable," she said. Sumit relaxed as they resumed talking together as they had earlier. She told him how difficult it was to take care of children at home. Realising that Sumit was not interested, she said, "Of course, someone who doesn't have children wouldn't understand anything about this." "No, I understand," he replied. "Tell me about them." "No, I'll tell you about my childhood instead," she answered.

They ordered lunch and after they had eaten, Radha asked, "Would you mind if I stretch out on your bed?" Without waiting for an answer she went over to the bed and lay down while Sumit got a chair for himself. He knew where this was heading but did not want to rush things.

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"Will we meet again like this?" he asked. "Certainly, can there be any doubt about it?" she answered. "But how?" "I'll figure out a way. I find I have to take care of everything. Come over here and I'll tell you how."

Lying in her arms, Sumit told her his story, told her everything about himself, things he had never told anyone else: his failings, his shame, his despair. And of his many different affairs, which had all ended badly. When at last he spoke of Sharada he relived his old fears. Filled with anxiety he was unable to be intimate with Radha, and gazed at her apologetically. She tried to comfort him, saying, "After all, this isn't the last time we'll be together; I'm sure everything will be alright next time. I suppose it was my fault too somehow." Finding Sumit crying in her lap, she said, "Go and wash your face. Once we get back we'll have to decide where and how to meet again."

He knew that back home it would be difficult to meet a married woman, but it was Radha who found a solution. She told him when to call, what to say if someone else answered the phone, and how to ask to speak to her. She also gave him precise instructions on when to visit her at home. When Radha left assuring him they would meet again soon, he could not believe his good luck. Had somebody else told him about such a relationship he would have been incredulous. These past three days had been the most blissful in his life.

Once back home, the three days seemed to him to have been a dream. Had they really happened? Out of doubt he

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hesitated and did not contact Radha; it was she who ended up phoning him. Without asking why he had not called, she told him when and where they could meet. That evening, picking Radha up in his car and parking by the roadside in the dark, Sumit realised how difficult it would be to maintain the relationship. When he told her this, she agreed, "We can't go on like this, meeting secretly in a car." Once again, it was Radha who came up with a solution. She made Sumit a patron of the organisation she ran, giving them a reason to meet.

That made it easier for them to be together; Radha became a part of his life. As Sumit lived on his own there was no problem with Radha going to his place, but he was worried people might notice. When he told her this her response was, "Maybe they will, but should we stop seeing each other then?" "What if your husband finds out?" "I know he might," she replied. "But then, we have to run that risk." Sumit was always worrying about Radha's husband. He would tell her, "Do you know what the provisions are in the penal code? If your husband were to file a case, nothing would happen to you but I'd go to jail." And she would answer, "That's unfair. Why should only one person be punished when there are two involved in the crime?"

It was not that Radha did not like her husband, Abhay. It even seemed to Sumit that Radha loved Abhay as much as she did him. She would taunt him, comparing him to Abhay, which would make him angry. "Abhay could have done that in a couple of minutes," she would say. Irritated,

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Sumit would reply, "That's alright. I admit it, Abhay's my superior." "Was there ever any doubt about that?" she would say.

"That means Abhay is better than me in all respects: looks, brains and on the home front." To which Radha would add, smiling, "And in bed too." "So then why ...", Sumit would start and hold back, but Radha would pick up on it. "I know what you were going to say. The answer to your question is: 'Because I wanted to.'" After that, how could Sumit be angry with her any more? Matching his laughter to hers, he would say, "That means you really are stupid."

Each time Radha insisted that Sumit meet her husband, he would find an excuse not to, but one day he finally accompanied her home. Athough he would speak well of Abhay in front of her, he in fact felt some animosity towards him. But when they met Abhay was such a nice person and was so good to Sumit that he could only feel warm and friendly. Abhay knew that Sumit and Radha were doing some good work together. He had given Radha complete freedom in her work and never poked his nose into it. For the first time Sumit saw Radha together with her family, and saw that their relations were happy and intimate. Complete harmony reigned, and there was a feeling of fulfilment. Sumit felt a little jealous; he wondered if he was an unwanted trespasser in her life.

The next time they met, Sumit told her how he felt. "Why did you feel that way?" Radha asked. "Have I ever held anything back in our relationship?" "No," he replied,

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"but I feel I had no right to enter your life." "What do you mean you entered my life ? I entered yours." Radha was right, as usual, but Sumit could not understand why she had taken up with him. If he had asked her, her casual answer would have been, "Because I wanted to." But there was certainly more. Perhaps Radha had come to him to bring joy into a life that was falling apart, the way divine blessings come to human beings.

Without a second thought, he said, "Marry me." That was something he had never said to anyone before. "Have you lost your mind?" asked Radha. "I won't come to you anymore if you say those words again." Sumit was about to add something, when she went on, "Our relationship has never been based on any conditions; please don't talk about marriage again." Seeing that Sumit was still serious, she said, "Now get up. We have so many projects pending." That was part of their secret language, and Sumit could not help laughing.

There were no problems in their relationship, yet somehow Sumit was not fully satisfied. Perhaps he was growing old and feeling the need to have a family of his own, or perhaps he was afraid that one day he might lose her. Whenever he confided this to her, she would chase away his fears with some casual remark.

Then, one day, Sumit fell ill. Although Radha came to see him now and then, he wanted her to stay by his side. "Don't you think I would like to stay with you?" she asked. "But is that possible?" When she came to visit him, he

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would insist she stay longer. "Alright," she would reply. "Since you've asked me to, I'll stay five minutes more. Get better soon. We've got so many projects pending. Once you recover we'll have to take them up; do you understand!"

His illness continued. On one of Radha's visits, he kept insisting she should marry him, saying that meeting five minutes a day was not enough. Radha became serious, "You know my family well. How could I leave them? What would you do in my place?" Sumit answered, "I don't know, but you haven't any right to torture me like this."

"You mean you'd be happy not to see me anymore?" Sumit did not answer. Wiping all seriousness from her face, Radha added, "Who are you to say whether I should come or not. Did you ask me to come? I came because I wanted to. Isn't that right?"

Sumit still would not give up. "Is that your last word?" he asked, "Tell me if it is." To which she replied, "There aren't any first or last words, don't you understand?" Looking at her watch she said, "Let me go." Sumit was still serious, "First you must answer my question".

Radha got up, looked at him and said, "Alright. Tomorrow I'll come and give you an answer. Now, smile." Sumit smiled. Now, he had no complaints. He knew what Radha's answer would be. Radha was a goddess. How can a goddess ever belong to one person alone? Goddesses belong to everyone.

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The Homecoming

READING THE NEWSPAPER EACH MORNING TRIVIKRAM would think how impossible life in Delhi had become, with its robberies and murders, unsafe roads, price increases, load shedding, water in short supply .... Who could live in such a city? In addition, the climate was one of extremes, oppressively hot in summer and chillingly cold in winter. He would list to himself all the other inconveniences of life in Delhi. It would never be a place where he could live; he would certainly have to return to his home town.

But where *was* his home town? His village in the remote district of Kalahandi, or Cuttack, which his wife considered her family's place: he could not be sure which. Kalahandi was where his father was born. His father had held a job with the Government of Orissa and had been transferred from place to place. Trivikram had been born in Baripada, educated in different places, and had finally joined the Accounts and Audit Service and been transferred all over

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India. He had ended up staying in Delhi longer than anywhere else, and his children had been educated there. Now they were scattered throughout the country, living with partners they had chosen for themselves. After retirement, living in the house he had had built in Delhi, he often thought about moving back to his birthplace.

Before building a house in Delhi, Trivikram had thought of building one in every city he had worked in—Calcutta, Dehradun, Bangalore ... . Whenever he first arrived in a new city he did not feel at home, but by the time he was transferred the city he had been living in seemed like paradise lost. Whenever he communicated these feelings to his longtime friends they would comment, "If ever you go back to your home town, you'll find life difficult and think Delhi was ideal." At that point in time he had not yet built a house, and his friends were advising and encouraging him to do so as soon as possible. They talked about the advantages of living close to each other after retirement, saying he should buy land near theirs and build a house. Trivikram never let himself be influenced, afraid he would end up living the rest of his life with his colleagues' quarrelsome wives as neighbours. Once, persuaded by his friends, he had almost built a house in Dehradun, but fortunately a sudden transfer had saved him. It was during his many years in Delhi that he had been able to build a house without too much hardship or worry.

Once he had retired, the house tied him down. If he had had a house elsewhere, would he have stayed in Delhi? His

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friends, of course, laughed at his reaction, saying, "First of all decide where you want to live. Prices in Delhi are going up; you could sell your house any time you wanted to and buy another somewhere else. Your problem is that you can't live outside Delhi. Where else could you have the same advantages? As long as Delhi is the capital, and the ministers, members of parliament and top civil servants all live here, the city will have everything you need. Have you ever heard of shortages of kerosene, rice, sugar, etc. in Delhi?"

During one such conversation, Trivikram had said, "Selling a house is easier said than done." "If you want to sell your house," replied his friend Ramaswamy, "I'll give you a deposit on it right away." Ramaswamy had really meant it, as he had been looking for a house in Delhi. He had worked in the same department as Trivikram, and they had retired at almost the same time. Trivikram had his own house, while Ramaswamy lived in a rented house in the same colony. A good number of Trivikram's friends who had retired also lived there. As they did not have to go to work, they would often meet after breakfast at a residents' association office in the area. There Ramaswamy would collect information about possible houses for sale.

Trivikram thought Ramaswamy a strange person. While he was thinking of returning to his birthplace after retiring, Ramaswamy was desperately trying to stay in Delhi. Having served for a long time in northern India he spoke fluent Hindi, ate non-vegetarian food, and was completely cut off from his own people in the south. Whenever there was the

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talk of his going back to Tamil Nadu, he would comment, "It's impossible to put up with those narrow-minded Madrasis and live with all their sambar and dosa. I feel quite at home in Delhi." In fact he had become a complete Delhiite and was on quite good terms with Aroras, Bhatias, and Mathurs in his area.

Even though Ramaswamy lived in Delhi, his mind was focused on the United States. That is where his son and daughter lived, and his wife sometimes went to stay with them. Though he had turned them down when they had asked him to go and live with them, he kept abreast of everything to do with the U.S. His house was full of things bought in America; his clothes and shoes were all American. He was almost an authority on the United States, with the information he had gathered poring over maps and reading American books and magazines. He was more interested in American elections than those in India; he knew more about the hurricanes that hit South Carolina than the natural disasters in Tamil Nadu. He knew all the streets and lanes in the city where his son lived. In conversation, the extent of his knowledge would surprise people. Take, for example, Hindu temples in America. He would say, "Yes, there are Hindu temples in America but they're at great distances. You can go there only on weekends, but then Hindu festivals don't fall on weekends! And on weekends you also have to get groceries at the supermarket." And so on.

Asked why he had not gone to the States for a short visit, Ramaswamy would give different answers. Sometimes he

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would say, "I can't live there, it's too cold." The next time he would have forgotten what he had said earlier. "It's cold in America," he would say, "but who cares. The houses, cars, and shops are all heated. What does it matter if it's cold and snowing outside." If someone asked him, "Then, why don't you go?," he would give a different answer, "I wouldn't mind going but who'd look after my house here? Like a dog, a house can't be left alone. If I went to America for a couple of months, who would pay the electricity, water, and telephone bills?"

But Trivikram knew that all these explanations were only excuses. Ramaswamy did not travel because he loved to be on his own. He cooked his own meals and took care of everything around the house himself, such as the electricity, the plumbing and minor repairs. Everything in the house was organised: he had letter pads, envelopes, postage stamps, and a proper tool box. He spent his time after retiring doing his household chores or visiting friends in the colony. He would stop and talk to anyone he ran into on the street, but that was the extent of their relationship. He said he could not live among the Madrasis, but it was also true that he could not live among the Punjabis in Delhi. He could only live on his own, by himself.

Ramaswamy was level-headed and wise, a source of sensible advice. Trivikram would often consult him on different matters. When Trivikram would tell him he had decided to go back to his birthplace, Ramaswamy would serve him tea, not coffee, and ask, "It's fine that you've

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decided to go back home but have you asked your wife how she feels about that?" Trivikram never thought his wife had her own feelings about anything. In the past, whenever he was transferred, she never reacted. Of course, there hadn't been much choice in the matter as transfers were ordered by the government. Selling the house was a different matter, however, and Trivikram felt he had to consult his wife. But he was afraid she would insist on going to Cuttack, where her relatives lived, which would mean not going back to his father's birthplace, Kalahandi. Instead of telling Ramaswamy all that, he would reply, "My wife will agree to go back to Kalahandi."

Ramaswamy said, "Very well, you'll go back to Kalahandi.... No, no, there's no need to tell me about Kalahandi. Thanks to the famine there, Kalahandi is as well-known as Somalia. But where in Kalahandi are you going to live?" Trivikram had not really given that any thought. His father's place of birth was in Koksara, in the district of Kalahandi. Trivikram had perhaps gone there when he was a child, but later on his father had settled at the district headquarters, Bhawanipatna. For Trivikram, Kalahandi meant Bhawanipatna, but he had visited there only a few times when he was a student, during the vacations. So, instead of saying anything about Koksara, he just told Ramaswamy, "If I go, I'll stay in Bhawanipatna. We once had a house there."

While Ramaswamy was preparing some tea, Trivikram tried to remember what the house in Bhawanipatna was

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like, but his memory failed him. He had not been there for more than twenty years. The last time had been when his mother had passed away. When his father died he had not been able to go as he had important engagements elsewhere. In the meantime the house his father had built must have been divided up among his brothers. He had signed some papers to this effect a long time ago. His brothers might not be living in Bhawanipatna; they were scattered all over the place because of their jobs. It was only recently, after retirement, that his elder brother had returned there.

Ramaswamy placed the cup of tea before him and said, "So you'll go back to Bhawanipatna! What's it like?" "I haven't been there for years," said Trivikram, "but considering how other cities have developed, Bhawanipatna too must have changed." "Is there drinking water? When there's a famine, will you be able to get food?" Irked by the aspersions cast on his birthplace, Trivikram replied, "Do you think Orissa's backward?" "I'm not talking about Orissa, but about Kalahandi," answered Ramaswamy. "According to recent reports there hasn't been any development there since Independence." Without taking up the argument, Trivikram simply replied, "People are able to live there nevertheless." "People also live in the jungle, with almost nothing to eat. The question is how someone like you, who has lived in a city like Delhi, can live in Kalahandi."

Ramaswamy always discouraged him like this, frightening him by saying there would not be any good doctors and then asking whether there were dry cleaners in Kalahandi!

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Sometimes to get a word of encouragement from Ramaswamy, Trivikram would attempt to lure him with his offer to sell his house only to him, not to anybody else. But Ramaswamy was not one to rise to the bait. Rather he would say, "It's no use now thinking about selling your house. First, you have to decide whether you're going back to Orissa."

Trivikram would mull this over in his mind, but then something else would push it out of his consciousness. Either the children would come to the house, or he would have to go to the hospital because someone was ill; things like that. Under such circumstances who could think about whether to return home? Ramaswamy would joke, "Thinking of returning is a romantic illusion. Everyone's nostalgic. When you think of your city thirty years ago, you're reminded of the friends you had in your youth, of films you saw and the songs you sang, of fairs and festivals. But those are now all things of the past." At times Trivikram realised the truth of what Ramaswamy was saying. Some years before he had thought of spending the rest of his life in Calcutta. He had had a big bungalow, with quarters for two families of servants. Most importantly, the widow and her son who worked for him had taken good care of his family. Trivikram's children were not grown up, and he was not drawing a large salary, but still life had been pleasant. Rupa and her son Kamal had been a great help to them. Trivikram would think of going to Calcutta and bringing Rupa and Kamal to live with him, to work for him. This thought occupied his mind for a long time but when he realised that

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by then Rupa must have died and Kamal, an adult, must be lost somewhere in the big city, he abandoned the idea of going to live in Calcutta.

One day Ramaswamy gave Trivikram a thick book, saying he should read it since he always felt like going back to where he had grown up. The book was about the journey of an African American who at long last found his 'roots'. Trivikram took the book, turning it over in his hands. He had never read such a thick book and could not imagine ever reading this one. He said, "I can't read this big book. Tell me what it's about." "You have to read it to understand what's in it. But if it's its size that scares you, I can give you an abridged version." Saying this Ramaswamy got up and returned immediately with an old issue of *The Reader's Digest*. Only Ramaswamy could find something he wanted so easily and so fast. On hearing about the book from Ramaswamy, Trivikram said, "I don't have the same problems as black people in America. My home is in the district of Kalahandi in Orissa. That's all." "Things are not as simple as that," Ramaswamy answered. "Kalahandi is the home of tribals. How did Brahmins like you end up there? Certainly something in the past must have brought you from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh."

Trivikram could not concentrate on the abridged version of the book. He only wanted to go back to his homestead; why should he read about someone in America. Suddenly, he became fascinated by this word 'homestead' which had occurred to him. His father's homestead was in

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Bhawanipatna and he would go back there, no matter what Ramaswamy thought.

In the meantime Ramaswamy had not been idle. He had collected all the negative news items about Kalahandi. Whenever he met Trivikram, he would show him newspaper clippings saying how wretched conditions were: children sold for five rupees, death from starvation in Sinapali, disease affecting cattle in Jaipatna, sixty-eight percent of crops destroyed, etc. It was Trivikram's bad luck that the poverty in Kalahandi had once again become national news. The Prime Minister had gone there and a commission had been set up to find out if what was being reported was true. As he did not have any good arguments in Kalahandi's defence Trivikram resorted to something else, "Maybe all the news about Kalahandi is true, but that shouldn't stop me from going back to my birthplace, shouldn't make me give up my native land, my *homestead*."

Ramaswamy was not someone to admit defeat. He said, "Do one thing. Go to Kalahandi and see what it's like. Things will certainly be different from thirty years ago. The other day I was talking to you about nostalgia. You might be thinking that the banyan tree where you had your swing is still standing, and the mango grove nearby, and the pond where you had your first swimming lessons. Do you think they'll still be there? You might find that the banyan tree has been cut down to make way for houses, that the pond has been filled in and made into a park, and that a cinema now stands on the playground. Does the old Bhawanipatna

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you once knew still exist? Go and find out for yourself what Bhawanipatna is like now."

The more Ramaswamy's arguments disarmed him, the more whimsical Trivikram grew. He decided to go to Kalahandi, come what may. If need be, when he returned from Kalahandi, he would lie to Ramaswamy and tell him that everything about it was wonderful. But in the end that would not be possible; he could not persuade himself to spend money and time to go there without a clear reason to do so.

One morning Trivikram read a short report in the newspaper which he thought would silence Ramaswamy. A girl from the United States was coming to India in search of her roots; her great-great-grandfather was from Bihar. Trivikram went to Ramaswamy's house to show him the piece. Glancing at the newspaper, Ramaswamy exclaimed, "Oh, that girl's from California! Everyone knows how crazy those people are! Do you think she's coming to live permanently in Darbhanga or Bhagalpur in Bihar? She'll stay there for a month or so and then go back and write a book about her journey in search of her roots. She probably has a contract with a fat advance from a magazine or newspaper."

Nothing could satisfy Ramaswamy. After all, thought Trivikram, it was he who was going to live in Bhawanipatna. What concern was it of Ramaswamy's? Let him live in Delhi and be gunned down by terrorists or crushed under the wheels of a bus. He decided not to talk about it to

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Ramaswamy anymore. A few days later, Ramaswamy suddenly said, out of the blue, "It's a good thing you've finally arrived at a decision." Not able to make head or tail out of what he was saying, Trivikram asked, "About what?" "About not living in Delhi any more," replied Ramaswamy. "Now you should turn your full attention to selling your house." Seeing Trivikram's astonishment, Ramaswamy said, "Like you, my son is also bent upon returning home. He has written to me that he's going to leave the United States and come and live in Delhi. He has asked me to get him a house. But don't think I'm trying to get your house for cheap. Find out the best price you can get for it, and then let me know, so that I can write to my son. If he considers that the price is right then we'll buy the house."

On seeing Ramaswamy suddenly change his colours like a chameleon, Trivikram asked him, "Couldn't you change your son's mind?" "I can try to make you see reason," said Ramaswamy, "but I wouldn't waste my time and effort trying to convince my son." After this, he kept asking Trivikram to sell him the house, even sending real estate brokers over to meet him. When Trivikram had been arguing with Ramaswamy, he had been feeling strongly about going back to his home; now his ardour was cooling. Ramaswamy made fun of him, "It would seem you have postponed your return home to the next Five Year Plan."

While their game of hide-and-seek went on like this, there was a news report with the headline: "The Bihari Girl from the USA." After much difficulty the girl from San

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Francisco had reached her great-great-grandparents' house in the Arah district of Bihar, but had not been able to meet up with any of her relatives: they were all very poor and had left in search of work elsewhere. Another report also mentioned that Laura Martin would be giving a talk about her experience of returning home that same evening.

Trivikram and Ramaswamy went to the meeting together. The girl who stood up to speak was visibly unwell. She recounted her journey, which had begun two years before. A brilliant boy from a remote village in Bihar had gone to London on a scholarship. There he had met and married a German girl. They had had a son, who found a job in the United States, moved there, and married the daughter of an Italian immigrant. Laura was descended from that boy from Bihar. It took her five minutes to give all these details, and she then spent half an hour recounting the difficulties she had faced: problems getting her visa at the Indian consulate in San Francisco, having her traveller cheques stolen in Bombay, the lack of police cooperation, the taxiwalla's rudeness, the problem of getting drinking water in Bihar, getting hepatitis from the food she ate, etc. And then she talked about the poor economic situation and about the inefficiency of Indian administrators, saying that it was because of them that so many people were still living below the poverty line and that it must have been because of this that her relatives had left their village. Even if what she said was true, her outspokenness about the state of affairs in India and the condition of its people irked the members of

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the audience. When they were invited to ask her questions, they were aggressive. Someone asked her if she realised how badly Indians were treated in the United States. Another if she knew how foreign culture was polluting the villages of India. If the aim of these questions was to hurt and enrage her, then they succeeded. Her face became redder and redder. Amidst bouts of coughing, she answered the questions with equal rudeness. When someone asked her if she would come back to India again, her reply was clear, "No way, never." Again a question: "Wasn't she curious about her forefathers anymore?" "They are all dead and gone," said Laura, "thanks to your government's apathy."

After that more people stood up to ask questions. The chairman was forced to take control of the meeting. He was an elderly former diplomat, adept at these sort of things. He stood up and gave a long, winding speech on Indo-American relations. Gradually the anger of the audience abated and Laura too smiled at the chairman's retelling of an oft-repeated joke. At the end of his speech, the president said he would allow only one more question, pleading that time was already up.

It was Ramaswamy who asked the question. "After investing so much time, labour and money, what lessons do you draw from your experience?" Her irritation and rudeness gone, Laura looked exasperated and helpless. She thought for a couple of seconds. Her answer was quiet and articulate. "In the search for a home," she said, "it's impossible to turn back the clock. Home is wherever one is; wherever."

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The Bystander

SAMBIT MADE HIMSELF COMFORTABLE IN THE BACK OF the bus and returned to his book. The road was rough and the constant movement made reading difficult, but the book helped him escape the meaningless conversations going on around him. His fellow reporters were engaged in a discussion about how smart a particular politician was in party affairs, but Sambit was not interested. He kept apart from his journalist friends, earning a reputation for snobbishness. But he did this naturally and was not unhappy about it. He was proud that while his friends occupied themselves with petty affairs he wrote analytical socio-political essays and did not hesitate to criticise those in power. This made him unpopular, but what he wrote could not be ignored.

It was extremely hot but the bus was airconditioned. The Government had done everything it could to make their journey comfortable. A public relations officer had

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come along to make sure they had everything they needed. He tried to keep them happy and was very good at his job. Like a steward on an airplane, he served them water and tea and played the music they asked for. But still they were not satisfied. When only biscuits were served with the tea, one of them commented, "Aren't there cashews in the market these days?" Although the officer knew they did not have any cashews he went through the motions of looking for some and ended up blaming the guesthouse staff. "They told me there were cashews, but where are they? Next time we'll get our food from a better restaurant. You just can't trust government employees." He said this knowing that it was better to agree with them when they criticised the Government on small, trivial matters. Having blamed the lack of cashews on government inefficiency he added, "But I myself packed the cold beer. There won't be a problem with that." Taking a bottle opener out of his pocket he added, "At your service."

The special correspondent for the *Jagaran*, who did not believe in having tea at odd hours, reacted eagerly, "Why wait? It may not be hot in here, but outside our throats will be parched." They had just had tea. The reporter for the *Dainik Sakal* remarked, "It's only ten thirty." But when the officer took out the chilled beer nobody objected. Carefully pouring the beer into mugs, he passed them around, one by one. "It's good we're having the beer early," he said. "Otherwise the fried fish to go with it would get cold." Taking his first sip, the *Varta* correspondent commented,

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"You're feeding us so generously; I hope you're not planning to skip lunch." The officer replied that arrangements had been made at the forest bungalow. "Is the food there as bad as at the guest house?" asked *Janamat*. *Saptahik Kranti* joined in, "Lunch wouldn't be lunch at the forest bungalow if we're not served venison!" "There'll be everything, Sir," the officer replied. "The Chief Minister himself has talked to the Chief Conservator. All we have to do is reach there on time."

The journey had been scheduled to start at seven, but not everybody was ready. And as *Varta* had not come, the bus had to go to his place to pick him up. It was already nine when they left the capital. The officer calculated the time the trip would take and realised that they would not be able to reach their destination by afternoon as planned. If they stopped at the forest bungalow it would be night by the time they arrived. That pleased him, since in that case he would not have to take them around that evening. After they had had their food, they would retire to their rooms.

The previous fortnight a communal riot had broken out in a small town four hundred kilometres from the capital. Thirteen people had died, many others had been injured and parts of the city had been destroyed by fire. According to reports, the riot had been triggered by police negligence. During the worst days of the riot, outsiders, even journalists from the state capital, had been afraid to go to the area. There were complaints against the local authorities, but the government had taken no action; it had not even set up a commission of inquiry to verify the facts. Emboldened by

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the lack of action, the local authorities had resorted to repression, under the pretext of keeping the peace. For the people in the area it was a case of going from the frying pan into the fire. There had been police atrocities. When news of this came out in the papers, the Chief Minister decided to send some journalists to the town so they could see for themselves that the situation had returned to normal. Sambit had not imagined that he would be included along with *Jagaran, Sakel* and *Janamat*. But the C.M. was a clever politician. He was quite sure that on a tour like this one, organised by the government, journalists would not find anything negative to report. And if an impartial and independent minded journalist like Sambit were to report favourably on the situation that could only enhance the government's credibility.

While sipping his beer, Sambit glanced at the others; they were all busy over their glasses. The officer went through the moving bus balancing mugs of beer in one hand and the plate of fried fish in the other. Sambit was disgusted, but could not do anything else but join in. Otherwise, his fellow reporters would think he was just being stand-offish. When his friends were either closing their eyes to the government's faults or merely criticising it mildly, he was using the harshest words. For this, he was disliked. Once someone had said to him, "When we were being put in jail for going on strike in college, you were spending your time in the library. Do you remember that? It's easy to write about these things. If you're so brave, why don't you take part in the protests?"

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There were often arguments about this. What should journalists do? What is their social responsibility? What should photo journalists do? Should they take a picture of a man who has set himself on fire or try to save him? It was unclear how much of an activist an intellectual can be. Intellectuals always have an impulse to visit the action and join in, but their participation is brief and futile; they want the thrill of action without the time-consuming preparation and the painful consequences. At the earliest they run away to safety. Thinking of all these things Sambit could never reach any conclusion. Now sipping the beer and eating the fish, he was once again invaded by the question, but he forcibly put it out of his mind.

It was two in the afternoon when the bus reached the forest bungalow. The Forest Department personnel had made elaborate arrangements. The senior officer who had been placed in charge of them had arrived one day earlier. Jungle fowl and barking deer had been shot for their lunch. There was a good stock of cold beer and fresh white linen on the dining table. There were forest guards on the verandah waiting to carry out orders. No sooner had the journalists got off the bus and entered the bungalow, than they said, "Say what you want, it would hard to fault these arrangements." The public relations officer passed his duties on to the forest officers and settled down for a rest. Soon everyone had been served cold beer and meat snacks. They were all concentrating on enjoying each mouthful, and conversation was reduced to a minimum. For one and a half hours the drinking session went on and

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when the beer ran out the public relations officer was informed. He suddenly got up and asked everyone to go in to lunch, saying the food was getting cold. Gulping down the rest of his drink *Janamat* complained, "Sala, why are you worrying so much about the food? Did we come here to eat? Sala, do you think you'll get us to write favourable reports just by feeding us to the gills?" He was about to add something else when the officer replied, "I only said we were getting late for lunch." Then he ordered the forest officer to bring in the food.

Putting down his empty glass, Sambit wondered if he was any better than the others. Could he pretend to be different just by sitting in a corner of the bus, reading a book? What right did he have to consider himself any different from the others? Would his protest be limited to sitting in his house and writing accounts, or would he go down into the streets with fists clenched? He lacked courage, otherwise he would not have avoided the strikes in college and stayed in the library reading. While thinking about this, slightly intoxicated from the beer, he started eating the food on the plate he had been handed. By that time *Janamat* had started abusing the government virulently. It was five in the afternoon when they reboarded the bus. They discovered that *Jagaran* was missing; the officer found him being sick in the bathroom, and helped him onto the bus.

They reached their destination at 8 p.m. Waking from his light sleep, Sambit saw that the bus was entering a small town. A kind of gloom envelops small towns in the evening;

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lights are dim and the streets empty. This one was no exception. The bus stopped in the central square, where a statue of Gandhi was barely visible, but the name of a hotel glittered brightly under a neon light, attracting attention to the semi-circular building standing amidst some small shops. It was the Park Hotel, probably named for the park with its statue of the Mahatma. The windows of the three-storey hotel opened onto the square and, from the bus, the lights made it look like some historical monument. After thinking about it for some time, Sambit was reminded of the Colosseum, where onlookers in ancient Rome could watch human beings being thrown to the lions.

As the bus came to a halt the officer woke everyone up and asked them to proceed into the hotel. All the rooms on the middle floor had been booked for them, along with a room on the ground floor, for parties. The officer told them to freshen up while he met with the manager of the hotel to make whatever arrangements were necessary. There had never been riots in this small town of forty thousand people before; Hindus and Muslims had been living in perfect harmony and no one had ever imagined that people from one community would ever attack the life and property of people from the other. In fact, the riots were the result of the arrival in the town of leaders from both sides, along with their henchmen. It was in this very hotel that they had hatched their conspiracies.

In the room on the ground floor the journalists were served plenty of drinks. Had they arrived in the afternoon

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they could have visited the riot-torn area, but since it was now dark that was postponed until the following morning. Instead of joining the others Sambit thought about the trip. He regretted not having come on his own; it would be impossible to cover such a sensitive incident as part of a group of drunkards, especially when sponsored by the government. In fact, he should have rushed to the spot as soon as he heard about the incident. But why hadn't he? One possible reason was that he had other urgent work to do, but he knew that in fact he had been afraid of trouble. Standing in front of the window, he looked towards the statue of the Mahatma. Gandhi's face was not clearly visible in the street light, but the strength and determination in his march towards Noakhali, staff in hand, was unmistakable. Like someone who has been chastised, Sambit turned sadly away from the window and joined his friends.

The evening was a repetition of the afternoon at the forest bungalow. *Janamat* was more vitriolic in his criticism of the government, although everyone knew that he would support it in the end. Glass in hand, *Jagaran* had fallen asleep in his chair. The others were all praise for the scotch whiskey and the Information department. But none of them talked about the riot, the reason they had travelled so far.

Diverting everyone's attention to the statue of Gandhi, *Dainik Sakal* said, "Do you know what Gandhiji did, after standing like that for all these years?" Knowing what he was about to say, everyone shouted, "Yes we all know; now be quiet." But *Sakal* did not keep quiet. Silencing everyone

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he said, "Gandhiji told the man who used to sleep under his statue every night, 'I'm tired of standing like this. Please arrange a horse for me.' The next morning the man met the Minister and told him of Gandhiji's request. That night, the minister accompanied the man to the statue. Seeing the minister, Gandhiji told the man, 'Son, I told you to bring me a horse and you've brought me an ass!'" No one found this old joke funny except *Sakal* himself, who doubled over in laughter.

When at last dinner was over, the officer said that the bus was out of order and that as an alternative arrangement they would go by police jeep the next morning. Sambit knew this had all been pre-planned. *Janamat* insisted, "We can go by police jeep but there shouldn't be any policemen accompanying us." "The policemen would have provided for your safety, Sir," replied the officer. "But since you object, there won't be any policemen other than the driver. And if something happens, I'll be there with you."

Back in his room Sambit changed out of his clothes and tried to fall asleep, but despite the drinks and the fatigue of the day sleep would not come. He knew that without sleep he would be tired the next day. Tossing and turning, he had just dozed off when he heard a scream. He got up, switched on the light and looked out of the window. The moon was bright and everything was clearly visible. Near the statue of Gandhi, two policemen were holding a man. Sambit could not hear what he was saying but could clearly read the terror on his face. He looked at Sambit desperately. The

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police began beating him and he fell to the ground, shouting, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die." Then the police stood him up and dragged him into an alley.

Sambit stood transfixed. What should he do? Run down and stop the police? Looking out of the window, he looked around. All the windows in the hotel were open. Although no lights were on in the other rooms, perhaps all the other journalists were wide awake too, observing the same scene. Like him, none of them did anything to go to the man's rescue. Sambit again looked at the park. There were no signs of what had just happened. The moon shone brightly, and Gandhi stood quietly, staff in hand. Everything was perfectly calm. Sambit went back to bed and tried to sleep. He had to do something about what had happened. Next morning everyone would surely discuss the incident. He would give a detailed description of it in his report, which would start with this terror in the dead of night. He even framed a few sentences in his mind, but language was inadequate to express the man's terror. He could not sleep; the man's scream had pierced his heart. He lay on the bed, hating himself.

The next morning, everyone behaved as if nothing had happened. Sambit thought of bringing up the incident but was afraid the others would say he should have woken them up. It was not possible they had not heard the man's scream through the open windows. Maybe, like him, they were also feeling guilty because they had not done anything. Was Sambit any better than them? As no one said anything about the incident, it would be foolish for him to report it. Besides,

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how could he write about it and reveal his weakness to the world? While he was thinking about all this, the man's scream again rang in his head. Unable to decide what to do he slumped into a chair.

Their investigation went as expected. The police jeep went into the lanes, but only the women and children were there; the men were at work. The women knew nothing about the riot; there was not a soul around the houses gutted by fire. The people in the marketplace said that everything was back to normal. Someone who was about to say something ran away when asked his name. The journalists noted everything down, took pictures and were convinced that order had been restored; there was no longer any trouble. At the police station they wrote down all the information about the extent of the damage, and the officer in charge assured them that everything was now calm in the city. As the hotel was not far away, they walked back. In the meantime the bus had been repaired. They took it back to the capital, satisfied that they had performed their duty.

Returning home, Sambit was in a state of mental crisis. No matter how hard he tried, he could not rid his mind of the incident. The helpless scream of the man kept on coming back to him over and over again. When he sat down to prepare his report for his newspaper, he could not write even a single line. He began to doubt his own powers of perception. His sleep was disturbed by the man's crying out, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die."

He carefully read through all the reports of the other journalists. All of them tritely repeated the same account of

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the riot and reported that the situation had now returned to normal. No one said anything about the alleged police brutality. In any case, nothing more was to be expected from a one-day government sponsored trip. There was mild criticism of the government in only one report, and that was *Jagaran*.

Over the next few days Sambit was in a state of mental anguish, as the scream of the man beaten by the police stuck in his mind. Maybe, some relief could have come from discussing the incident with somebody, but how could he do this without exposing his own weakness? When at last it became unbearable, he went to the office of the *Jagaran*. In his conversation with the correspondent who had been with him that day, Sambit touched on many things, but whenever he hinted at the incident the correspondent never seemed to respond. At last, Sambit decided to ask him straight out. He said, "That night I saw two policemen beating up a man in Gandhi square." As he said that, he heard the scream of the man his head. Sambit asked, " Do you know anything about that?"

The correspondent did not reply for a long time. Losing patience, Sambit was about to repeat the question when *Jagaran* said, "No, I didn't see anything like that." His reply further confused Sambit. Had he really not seen anything? Was everything just the product of his drunken imagination? He felt a bit relieved but once again he heard the scream, which seemed very real. Again he asked *Jagaran*, "Are you telling the truth?" Seeing Sambit off *Jagaran* said, "The truth is only what we can bear."

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Returning home, Sambit felt very tired. He ate and went directly to bed. As he began to hear the scream in his head, he decided, before falling asleep, to return to where the incident had taken place. He needed to know what had happened to the man. He had to face the truth.

He took his car. Just after he had left the city, the sky suddenly became dark with clouds. The road was rough. Still, Sambit was determined to keep on. At a certain point, he had to retrace his steps as he had taken a wrong turn. Against all odds, he moved on to face the truth.

When he entered the town it was almost midnight and the streets were deserted. Looking at the hotel from the square he thought of taking a room and begin asking questions the next day, but decided instead to go to the police station straight away and find out what had happened to the man.

He parked his car and entered the police station. There were two policemen, and he immediately recognised them; they were the ones who had been in the square that night. "What do you want?" one of them asked. "Last week," said Sambit, "I saw two policemen beating up a man in Gandhi square at night and dragging him into an alley. I want to know what happened to the man." The other policeman leafed through the register, smiled and said, "Nothing like that happened." Sambit persisted, "I saw it with my own eyes." Both the policemen got up, put on their caps, and picked up their lathis. "Take us to where it happened," they said.

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The three of them walked towards the statue of Gandhi. "Now tell me what you saw," said one of the policemen. This time Sambit was more direct. "I saw both of you beat up a man and take him away," he said. Both of them moved towards him and one of them raised his lathi to beat him. The scream that Sambit now heard was his own. He looked around; there was no one. He saw a light coming on in the window of a room in the hotel. The two policemen began beating him and he fell to the ground shouting, "I'm going to die, I'm going to die." The policemen stood him up. Once again he looked imploringly at the hotel but received no help. Now the policemen dragged him into an alley from where he could no longer see the light in the hotel window.

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The Ultimatum

Bireshwar and Srihari could never have imagined they would ever meet again, especially in a place like this. The only connection between them was that they had once been members of the same political party. Over the course of time, however, with splits in the parties, factional conflicts, and changes in leadership, they had turned into sworn enemies. What brought them back together, now, was their opposition to the party in power; their good fortune, or more exactly misfortune, was to be staying in the same place.

Both had been Chief Ministers of the state. That two C.M.s should end up together would have been somewhat unusual were it not for the fact that there were twenty-four former Chief Ministers still alive and active. Frequent elections, the formation of new groups, and constant changes in leadership had resulted in new Chief Ministers; one had even held office for no more than seventy-two hours. So it

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was not at all impossible to come across a former Chief Minister in the street. Nevertheless, when, one morning, Bireshwar saw Srihari coming out of the room adjacent to his, he was both astonished and alarmed. The previous night Srihari had been transferred to where Bireshwar was being held. When they came face to face Bireshwar looked through Srihari as if he did not exist, and, not to be outdone, Srihari pretended not to recognise Bireshwar.

Bireshwar was richer, more experienced, and more influential than Srihari, and had always felt superior to him. Whereas Srihari's term had lasted only six weeks, Bireshwar had been in power for four months and had been able to accumulate great wealth. Above all, though, their dislike for each other was based on caste: Bireshwar was a Brahmin and Srihari an untouchable. Bireshwar thought it beneath his dignity to be given the same treatment as Srihari: there was something underhanded in the government's having done this.

Both of them had been jailed for their oppostion to the Government's introduction of a bill restricting the freedom of the press. After losing the last election, the opposition parties had no well-defined policies and were waiting for a chance to get back into the public eye. When the press bill was introduced, they awoke from their sleep, became exponents of freedom of speech and started protesting. There was agitation in different parts of the state, led by Bireshwar and Srihari on behalf of their parties. When they had held the reigns of power both had done everything

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they could to control the newspapers. The electors, as is their wont, with their short memories and ability to forgive, forgot the past and supported them fully.

At first, the Chief Minister had thought that the agitation would die down on its own and did not take any steps, feeling that that would only create an advantage for the opposition. When the agitation did not subside, however, he realized he had to do something, and so he sent for the Director General of Police. The Chief Minister was an insomniac and the officers knew that if they had something confidential or important to discuss with him, the best time was late at night, after one a.m. So the officers found the best way to meet him: booze till one o'clock and then move straight to the Chief Minister's residence for discussions.

That night the D.G. had been drinking and was not in uniform, but even in such a state he did not hesitate to go to the Chief Minister, as he considered himself a confidant. He had come to be the D.G. ahead of people with more seniority and that had only been possible due to the support of the Chief Minister. He was ready to repay his debt by carrying out all sorts of illegal orders. His closeness to the Chief Minister was known to the public, who also knew that the D.G. not only looked like a goon but could also act like one.

After crossing the security cordon he went straight into the Chief Minister's bedroom. The Chief Minister lay on the bed wearing just a lungi, and a servant was massaging his limbs. He was surrounded by a pile of files, which his

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Private Secretary was having him sign. When the D.G. entered he asked the Private Secretary to leave. The D.G. touched the Chief Minister's feet in obeisance. Then taking off his shoes he sat on a chair close to the bed, one leg resting on the other, and gave an acount of the assignments he had been given. The Chief Minister was a man of few words and both of them knew each other very well. On hearing his report the Chief Minister uttered the names "Bireshwar, Srihari" as if he was repeating the names of God to himself. The D.G. got the hint and stood up to leave. Touching the Chief Minister's feet before leaving, he assured him, "It will be done within 24 hours." The Chief Minister replied, "No need to break any limbs." This referred to another occasion, when the D.G. had broken the leg of an opposition leader and embarrassed the Government. The D.G. answered, "No Sir, not this time."

Leaving the Chief Minister's bedroom the D.G. returned to the club, but by that time it had shut down. From there he went to the main police station for a surprise inspection. His driver woke up the thana daroga, who was well acquainted with these kinds of games. He made arrangements for food and drink for the D.G. in an anteroom. It was 2.30 a.m. when two constables put the inebriated D.G. into his car and drove him home.

The instant the D.G. woke up the next morning he rang up Bireshwar. In a calm voice he told him, "If you're free I'd like to come by your place to see you." Bireshwar knew this shrewd man inside out: during his tenure in office he

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had made use of the D.G. for his own questionable ends. He replied calmly, "Why are you asking? My door is always open to you. Are you coming with sweets to celebrate being made a D.G. or with a warrant?" "You're always making jokes, Sir," was the D.G.'s reply.

Bireshwar was waiting for the D.G. when he arrived. Greeting him at the door, Bireshwar said, "Take a seat. Would you like a drink or just tea?" "No Sir," answered the D.G. "Since becoming the D.G., I've totally given up alcohol. I have to maintain my health if I want to be able to get all the work done." Without further ado Bireshwar asked, "Now tell me, what message do you have from the Chief?" Without mincing his words the D.G. replied, "Sir, we're worried about the protests. Please leave the state for a few days." Calmly, Bireshwar asked, "Do you think I like this agitation? But would the people even let me leave?" And he continued, "No, I'm thinking instead that if the government is dissolved I'll go back to my village and get some rest." The D.G. realised that even if the tone and words were calm, the war was on. He was not a man to yield. "No Sir, why go to your village? You've got such a large house in Delhi; go and stay there."

"You mean my brother's house in Delhi? Is there anything you don't know about?"

"Everyone knows you've got a very large family spread all over India. There's not only the house in Delhi; in Bangalore there's your father's house, in Mumbai your father's brother's house, and in Calcutta your uncle's house."

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To cut things short, Bireshwar asked him to report to the Chief Minister that he had no plans to leave the state to live elsewhere.

The D.G. softened his voice and said, "You know the kind of man the Chief Minister is: always in a hurry. Aside from that, in matters of law and order, the state now has immense powers. I was only suggesting that you'll end up causing yourself problems needlessly."

"That's alright, I understand," replied Bireshwar. "I'll be ready by the time you send your people to get me." The D.G. got up to leave, but with a smile on his lips he added, "This time we won't be arresting Nata."

That was the worst blow for Bireshwar. In his political career he had seen the inside of a jail many times but the unwritten rule had always been that Nata, his servant, would be arrested too. People had made remarks about it, but each time Bireshwar was put in jail as a first-class prisoner Nata went with him, seeing to his comforts, making his life less difficult. If Nata was not going to be arrested this time, that would be real punishment.

Back home, the D.G. had different plans for Srihari. Ringing him up, he was very direct, "Hey, *saala* bloody scavenger, do you know who this is?" During Srihari's one-and-half-month term in office the D.G. had not asked him for any favours and there had been no special relationship between them. Srihari recognised the voice. He became angry, but instead of showing it, softly asked, "May I know who's speaking?" Previously, when anyone alluded to his

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caste, he would take offense, but these days he had grown accustomed to it and tried to remain calm. Failing to get a rise out of him, the D.G. decided that the call was a waste of time and put down the receiver.

That evening Bireshwar and Srihari were both arrested. In the case of Bireshwar, there were photographers and journalists—hired by him—in front of his house to record the event. Srihari, on the other hand, and unfortunately for him, was arrested at the dilapidated house which served as his party office. He was kept in jail in the capital but Bireshwar was put in jail far away; his presence in the state capital would only have made the situation worse. The Chief Minister was mistaken, however, if he thought the arrest of the two leaders would put an end to the agitation. It did not. The protests continued and as demands for the release of both leaders grew, Srihari was moved to the jail where Bireshwar was being held.

One of the reasons for sending the leaders to such a distant place was to keep them away from the capital, but there was an even more important reason, which was that the warden of the jail was a scoundrel. Nobody knew better than he how to put prisoners under maximum mental and physical stress. When Bireshwar was sent there the warden knew exactly what was expected of him; he needed no instructions from above. Getting up from his chair he moved forward to receive Bireshwar; asking everyone in the room to leave, he told Bireshwar to be seated, saying, "We're lucky to be graced with your presence. For as long as you

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stay with us—a month or two years—you won't have any problems. If ever you do, please send for me; I'm at your service." After this formal reception, he led Bireshwar to the section where first-class prisoners were held in two rooms. Once he left Bireshwar, the warden was not to be seen again.

The building holding the first-class prisoners was surrounded by barbed wire and set apart from the main prison house. There were two rooms, a kitchen, and a latrine. Entering the room Bireshwar first checked the cot, the bedsheet and the blanket, and turned on the tap to see if there was running water; he examined the pillows on the cot. The guard asked him, "Everything alright, Sir?" Still checking the room, Bireshwar said, "Everything seems alright for the present. I'll let you know later if I need anything." The guard added, "You'll have the services of a cook tomorrow." Having said this, the guard left Bireshwar on his own, leaving the barbed-wire compound and locking the gate.

Bireshwar had arrived at the jail at 11 a.m. An hour later, sitting on the cot, alone, he could not think of anything to do. The section for first-class prisoners was located in an unused corner of the jail, and it looked out on bare walls. Nothing was growing in the open space in front of the building, originally designed as a garden. No sound broke the silence. He opened up his baggage, wishing he had brought some books with him. He would send for some. With no work to do, he felt hungry. There was a pot of

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water, and so he drank some: it probably had not been changed for a week, and made him feel like vomiting. He ought to have had it checked when the guard was there. He lay down on the cot and waited for his meal.

He fell asleep. It was already 2 p.m. when he woke up, but there were no signs of anyone or any food. He felt thirsty, but remembering that the water was stale he used some to rinse his hands and legs and poured the rest down the drain. Light-headed from hunger he waited for food, but the gate was opened only two hours later. The man bringing his meal looked like a professional criminal. Bireshwar scolded him for being so late. After he had left the food and gone out of the room the guard told Bireshwar, "I didn't say anything while that man was here. You're new; you don't know the rules. From now on don't raise your voice. That man is a criminal. How could he know whether you were angry with me or with him? He's killed five people. What difference would it make to him to add another to the list?"

That frightened Bireshwar. Then the guard left, locking the gate behind him. Bireshwar took a bite of the roti; it was inedible, but he was so hungry that he ate two. Then when he was about to drink some water he remembered that he had not asked for it to be changed. He should not have got angry. He would not have forgotten about the water if he had not lost his temper. Now he would not see the man again soon. He took a glass of water from the bucket in the latrine. That water was not good either, but he was so thirsty

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he could not resist gulping it down. Inedible food, foul-smelling water, Bireshwar thought to himself, no, it's no use getting angry. So, when the guard came in the evening with his dinner, he talked pleasantly to him, even coaxing him into getting fresh drinking water and replacing the torn blanket. When he went to bed he remembered he had forgotten to bring his medicine. He would have to write home. He was reminded of Nata; at bedtime Nata would have massaged his hands and legs.

The next day a cook was arranged for him. The prisoner who was asked to to the cooking was an idiot. Tasting the food, however, Bireshwar realised the man knew how to cook. He felt relieved to think that at least the food would be cooked well. That night, however, the food was inedible. Talking to him, Bireshwar realised that the man was absolutely mad, that he understood nothing and did things as he liked. Bireshwar decided that he would ask to meet the warden to try and do something about it.

It was not easy to get to see the warden, however. When he asked the guard for a meeting, he was told that the Saheb was busy with inspection and would be able to see him only in two days. Bireshwar lost his temper: he was merely a warden, not a viceroy with no time to meet anybody. But it was no use getting angry with these people. So he asked for a pen and paper. "I'll lodge a complaint." That night Bireshwar wrote a letter containing a long list of grievances. The day after he handed in the letter he inquired about the delay. The guard said the letter was on the Saheb's

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table but that he was very busy. "Once he's free," he added, "he'll certainly give us the necessary orders." "*Saala* warden," muttered Bireshwar under his breath.

After a few days of this Bireshwar was on the verge of insanity. Except for his mad cook he had no one to talk to, and the food was mostly inedible. The staff kept their distance. None of his prior jail-terms had been so uncomfortable: before he had been placed with his own people, and there had been a lot of them. Nata had been there to serve him and the days had passed in jest and joy. Although he could not see what was going on inside the main jail he gathered from the noise that he would have been better off as a common prisoner. Under these circumstances, the news of Srihari being sent to the same jail should have come as a pleasant surprise. Bireshwar, however, decided to keep him at arm's length.

Although they lived side-by-side in two adjacent rooms, used the same latrine and were fed by the same cook, they neither looked at nor talked to each other. If Srihari stayed too long in the latrine, Bireshwar would knock on the door but not say anything. Sometimes Bireshwar would peep through the window to see what Srihari was doing. Most of the time he was happily lying on his bed. Bireshwar could see that Srihari never worried the way he did, and that he nonchalantly ate whatever food was brought to him. Bireshwar would mutter, "*Saala*, the starving wretch was born during the Great Famine. Why shouldn't he be happy? After all, he hasn't had anything to eat in his life!

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One morning Bireshwar was summoned to meet the warden. Bireshwar thought he would be getting some good news, that he was being released, perhaps even before Srihari, who would have to spend another fortnight or so in jail. After half an hour the warden came in. "I've got a lot of work, today," he said. "I don't have much time, even to talk to you. There's a package for you from home, and so I had to inconvenience you by asking you to come here." A constable set before him the contents of the package, which had been opened. Before Bireshwar could see what there was the warden picked through the things. There were different medicines, a silver toothpick, a magnetic waist belt, the Bhagavat Gita wrapped in a plastic cover etc. Pouring some white powder out of a bottle of Ayurvedic medicine, the warden sniffed it and said, "This could be poison. Such rubbish shouldn't be given to prisoners. I'm allowing you to have these things only this time. Write to your family not to send you any more *alukuchi*." After that, the warden stood up and left, as if he had some urgent work to do. Bireshwar had come with so many complaints but had not had the opportunity to express them. The warden's last words especially disheartened him.

Returning to his stable-like room, Bireshwar wondered what the warden had meant by "alukuchi." He checked the things his family had sent but found nothing objectionable. What could he possibly have meant? Was it a phrase used by the people from the lower class? Srihari would know. The question tortured him all day long; the strange phrase

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haunted him. Finally, he decided to sacrifice his self-respect and ask Srihari what it could possibly mean.

Bireshwar began pacing in front of Srihari's room, all the while thinking about how to break the ice. Srihari would certainly need coaxing, but then what else could he do? Bireshwar coughed in front of the window of Srihari's room and asked, "Do you have any headache balm?" Luckily Srihari also wanted to talk to somebody. Without making things difficult, he said, "Please come in. Why are you standing outside?" No sooner had Bireshwar taken a seat than they began to talk casually together, as if they met all the time and the last couple of days had never existed. In the course of their conversation neither talked about the balm; both of them knew that it had been merely a pretext. Bireshwar wanted to clear up his doubts, and so he said, "The warden's a scoundrel."

"The inmates in my last jail told me about him. He really is a scoundrel. They said he works hand in glove with criminals. He lets them out at night and keeps half of what they steal."

"Look at the treatment we're getting! To think that we were once Chief Ministers!"

"Forget that for now. So long as this *saala* government keeps us here, we'll have to swallow the insult. Once we get out we'll see how strong the government is."

"You're right, but as long as we're here why can't we be left in peace? Why can't we be allowed what our family sends us?"

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"Left in peace, in jail? The best we can do is accept our time here as a period of misfortune."

Realising that the point he was trying to make was not clear, Bireshwar asked, "As first-class prisoners don't we have any rights? Even the warden can't stop things such as newspapers and books being sent to us from home. Whatever we're sent belongs to us." Srihari became curious, "Was something stolen? Tell your family not to send anything of value." "No," answered Bireshwar, "but the warden kept calling my things 'alukuchi'." Then the conversation veered towards politics. They exchanged gossip about the Chief Minister and discussed the press bill, but Bireshwar still had not had the answer to his question. On his way out he asked from the threshold, "What does 'alukuchi' mean?" Without thinking much about it Srihari answered, "Must mean some kind of food."

Although Bireshwar's problem had not been solved, it had brought about a relationship with Srihari. They met frequently, though they did not become close friends. At first, they talked about politics and the state of affairs in the country, but later their main concerns were the inconveniences they were suffering in jail, such as the latrine not being cleaned properly, food not being provided on time, insufficient vitamins and calories, etc. When their repeated complaints fell on deaf ears, they decided to write directly to the government. Bireshwar knew the rules in the jail manual, so he prepared a list of infractions. They wrote a letter of grievance to the warden, which both of them signed.

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As he glanced through their letter, which was like an inspection note, the warden felt threatened, knowing it would lead to an investigation. Rereading it he went red in the face and tore it up. Thumping the call bell he ordered the peon to call the guard in charge of the first-class prisoners. When the guard arrived he reprimanded him. "Can't you even take care of two bloody fellows in khaddar?" he asked. "Now I'll have to look after them myself."

The warden had a kitchen cabinet of his own inside the jail, made up a handful of people who all owed him something. Among them was the doctor, to whom he provided vegetables from the jail garden. The doctor knew how to bring a problem prisoner under control, feeding him through the nose or keeping him on a heavy dose of saline for several days. The warden also had certain prisoners who did his bidding like faithful dogs. The rules of the jail did not apply to them and no one ever dared challenge them. With the warden's connivance they were able to get liquor, drugs, better food, etc. Delinquent juveniles from rural areas were at their service. In return for such advantages, they kept the other prisoners under control, quashing any criticism. Had the warden wished, he could have set them against the two V.I.P.s, but their muscle power far surpassed their intelligence. Worse, they would have created even more trouble. So, after mulling things over, he changed the cook in the first-class prisoners section for another named Bhikari, along with a tougher guard.

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Bhikari was a class-four employee and known to have close connections to the warden. Because of this, he was able to smuggle in contraband goods and had the run of the jail; everybody was afraid of him. Introducing Bhikari to the prisoners, the guard said, "Since you didn't like the cook you had, here's the best one in the jail. You won't have any more problems." Although there was something strange about the man's looks, Srihari and Bireshwar did not say a thing as they had complained about the previous cook. Now they would be in this man's charge; better to try and win his confidence.

They had been in jail for over a month. Due to vacations the passing of the press bill had been postponed and the agitation had let up, but there was no sign of their being released; the government seemed to have forgotten them. The party workers as well as the public in general also seemed to be paying less attention to them. Given the widespread apathy, they both had come to accept their days inside the jail.

The two of them passed their time together, but Bireshwar could not forget that Srihari was an untouchable. Bireshwar had had to live in their company before, but he considered being put up with one a serious insult. The Chief Minister must have done this deliberately. When Bireshwar had first heard of Srihari, he was just an ordinary party worker and later on a minor leader. When Srihari became Chief Minister, however, he began to consider himself Bireshwar's equal. Bireshwar had not been able to

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accept this, and even now he planned to put Srihari back in his place when they got out of jail.

More than worrying about Srihari, however, Bireshwar focused on Bhikari. From the very first day Bhikari was on duty it was clear to Bireshwar that he was there not to see to their needs but to spy on them. Once when Bhikari was unlocking his room, which was right next to theirs, Bireshwar had been able to glance in and see that it was better furnished than theirs. There was even a small television set.

They had expected Bhikari to cook for them, but it turned out that there was another prisoner to do the cooking and that Bhikari merely supervised. The first day the new cook was on duty, Bireshwar tried to extract some information from Bhikari and to flatter him as well. "Won't you cook, Bhikari babu?" he asked. "We'd hoped to have food you cooked." Although Bireshwar said this with a smile, Bhikari's harsh tone made it clear he did not want to be friendly, saying, "I'm a Vaishnav. I may be in government service, but that doesn't mean I've forgotten my caste and religion and serve low-castes like Bauris and scavengers." He said this loudly enough to be overheard by Srihari. Accustomed to this kind of provocation, Srihari had developed a thick skin and did not react, knowing what the consequences would be. Failing to provoke Srihari, Bhikari then made Bireshwar his target. "Although the cook I've hired is from a very low-caste—he's a Kandara—he's very good at it." On hearing this, Bireshwar turned pale. He could have eaten the food cooked by someone from a low-caste as long

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as the name of the caste had not been pronounced. Srihari was happy to see Bireshwar's discomfiture. Lowering his voice, Bhikari said, "I know you're a Brahmin, but then what can we do given the law? Say a word about it and you're inside." Bireshwar gave a slight nod, even though he realised he was already in jail.

Bhikari now set out to harass them any way he could. One way was the manner in which the food was prepared. Sometimes there would be no salt, at others the food was so salty they could not eat it. Sometimes the curry was so hot that tears ran down their checks. Srihari was able to put up with this harassment more easily than Bireshwar. As Bireshwar was fastidious about what he ate, Bhikari would make the food hotter or saltier, depending on his whim. Bhikari enjoyed making them feel uneasy and would say, "Cooking is a question of luck; you never know how a dish will turn out."

It was no use complaining to the guard about Bhikari, for the guard too seemed afraid of him. Bireshwar and Srihari both had had unpleasant experiences in jail earlier, but this was the first time they were being harassed by someone in a well-planned manner. Bhikari resorted to new tricks. He would play the radio as loud as possible at night, so they could not sleep. Under the pretext of repairing their rooms, he had their furniture taken out and their things messed up. Finding them walking in the garden, he had it dug up on the pretext that trees would be planted. That left them no place to walk outside. Bhikari's nastiest weapon was to talk about them in a voice loud enough for them to

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hear. He would tell the cook, "These bloody politicians would swallow this country whole." People often make such truthful remarks, but in this context the effect was rather unpleasant on the two prisoners.

One day Bireshwar made the mistake of telling Bhikari that he was not feeling well. Bhikari called for the doctor, who gave Bireshwar an injection that made him sore for five days. After that Bireshwar decided that he would forget his feelings of superiority and become friends with Srihari. Srihari also wanted them to become closer, and in no time they joined hands in planning ways to teach Bhikari a lesson. Srihari, in fact, was very shrewd, although he looked a fool. He tried to gain the cook's confidence on the basis of caste, and he did it without letting on. He was so successful that the food now was good, despite Bhikari's attempts to the contrary. Unfortunately, this could not be hidden from Bhikari for very long, and he replaced the cook with a new one who was even worse. He let them know he was as clever as they were, and would point it out in such a way as to make their hearts skip a beat.

Bhikari had yet another way of making their lives miserable. He would cut off the water at any time of the day, for example when either Srihari or Bireshwar was in the latrine. Then he started playing with the electricity. In summer he would see to it that the electricity was turned off, and the fan did not work, so that they would have to bear the excruciating heat. They both realised there would be no respite from him as long as they remained in jail.

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Around that time, the Assembly began to sit. Renewed discussion of the press bill led the opposition parties to start their agitation again, and the general public suddenly remembered that two former Chief Ministers were still in jail. Pressure mounted on the Chief Minister, forcing him to take steps. The District Collector was informed that he should contact them in jail and try to persuade them to stop the agitation so that they could be released. Bireshwar was very happy when he learned that the Collector would soon be meeting them, but Srihari remarked, "There must be something behind his visit." "It's time we put our foot down," said Bireshwar. "With the kind of warden we have here, we might not get a second chance to meet the Collector. We should make the most of this opportunity." "We'll insist right away that until our demands are met we won't do any negotiating," replied Srihari.

Although the Collector had no business getting mixed up in politics, he followed the Chief Minister's instructions and prepared for the meeting. He read the proposed amendments to the press bill, and discovered that they were indeed very rigid and anti-democratic. He knew it would be difficult to argue with the two politicians about the bill itself. The warden informed him that Bireshwar and Srihari were planning to send him a list of demands and that they would enter into discussions only if the government accepted them. The Collector was afraid they would raise questions regarding the press bill and use it as a pretext not to talk to him.

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With some trepidation, the Collector opened the list of demands. The short letter had been signed by both of them. In the ultimatum, there was no mention of the press bill. Their only demand was that Bhikari be transferred.

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Dear Jester

"DEAR JESTER," HE WROTE IN HIS DIARY THAT MORNING, "what plans for today? Live in the real world or go back to our imaginary characters and observe their movements? However enchanting the world of imagination it's impossible to settle there; one has to return to reality. Otherwise, who'll do the household chores? Who'll bring the morning cup of tea?"

After writing this much he was reminded of his tea and went out to prepare it. What a bother to be a writer! You have to take care of two worlds at the same time. Along with seeing to the well-being of your characters, you have to see to your own as well. And you don't even control your characters' movements. They move on their own and you need to keep a close eye on what they're doing and jot it down. In fact it's not as simple as it might seem. They live their own lives, as any human would, but you have to make them sound literary when you write about them. You have

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to change their conversation and turn it into gentle dialogues. You have to decide which parts of their conversations are to be edited out and which are to be retained. If you think there's not much responsibility involved, that little labour goes into this, then you're thoroughly mistaken.

Take language for example. Expletives dot our daily conversations. When you listen to two people talking you might fail to notice them; they don't sound out of place. Out of place? Odd? Irrelevant? OK, OK, they are unpleasant. If you put them down on paper they'll stick out like sore thumbs.

'Sore thumbs'—an English expression. There must be an Oriya equivalent—again, an English word, 'equivalent'—for it. But what to do? English words and expressions immediately come to mind. And apart from that, what language do our educated people use? Either all the words are English, or at least fifty per cent—oh, another English word, per cent—no, no, half of them are. Some people use dialects from Northern Orissa, say Sambalpuri, or Southern Orissa, such as Ganjami. Alas, what can the poor writer do in such circumstances? Theoreticians of literature would insist that the writer use language the characters themselves would speak. That seems easy enough but the problem is that either the poor writer will be thrown in jail on obscenity charges, or almost half of his words will be English, transcribed into Oriya, or his writing will be a form of Oriya which is incomprehensible to most of his readers.

But no one knows a writer's woes. Everyone thinks it's easy to be a writer. You buy reams of paper, fill the pen

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with ink, scribble anything you like and that passes for literature. And everyone will tell you that unlike them you don't have to go to the office from ten to five, that you've nothing to worry about, that you're comfortable, always left to yourself. Those who work in an office, five days a week, do not realise that an author works twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. He's never on holiday! He doesn't get even a minute's respite. Of course, it's true that like everyone else he has to see to household chores—shopping, paying bills, etc., but that does not mean he gets relief from his writing. Even when he's shopping, the monkey-faced character in his unfinished story stands beside him, giving him a prod. Or, suddenly waking up in the middle of the night, he can't get back to sleep because he can't be sure which of the two words, boredom or indifference, is more appropriate in the poem he wrote that evening.

Writers face many such problems. Once a writer was telling friends about his. Much to his surprise, instead of sympathising with him, they burst into laughter. "The bastard's showing off because his name appears in print," was how one reacted. That hurt him deeply. That's why—they were drinking in a dark corner of the press club—when the next round of drinks arrived he became angry and said he was leaving. Immediately, they all apologised. One of his friends cajoled him into sitting down again. He cooled down and joined them in another round. Once more, there was laughter. One of them commented, "Beware of Shakespeare's moods." He did not lose his temper this time; instead, his

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friend's comment struck him. It corroborated his thoughts on the constant use of English, for the friend could have mentioned Kalidas instead! How could he use language in the same way his friends did in their conversation? If he took it down verbatim it wouldn't merit being called literature. Let the critics say what they might, he would pursue his own style of writing. He was reminded of Alberto Moravia, who, after going through much turmoil as to what sort of language to use in his writing, finally chose literary language for his characters, the inhabitants of lanes and alleys of Rome. He maintained that 'the language of literature is always truer and more poetically expressive than spoken language.' Thinking over all these things, he was suddenly reminded that someone had laughed at him. He said, "Did someone mention Shakespeare? This time I'm really leaving." He said this, but when another round of drinks was served he didn't refuse to take one. No sooner had he taken the glass to his lips than the others laughed. One of them said, "*Saala* joker."

That night coming home tipsy, he decided, and he was almost serious, that he would no longer recount his woes as a writer to these insensitive people. Rather, he would write all of it down for his own satisfaction, so that he might get some relief from his sorrow. Dialogue with one's self goes on but writing has to be addressed to someone else. Were he to follow his friends' epithet, he would write, "*Saala* joker." But such language would not be permissible in literature. So, he took out a new notebook, and, addressing himself, wrote, "Dear Jester."

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He decided to write in his diary all the insults he had received from his friends that evening, and so rid his mind of them. He paused for a while before writing the first line. Isn't a diary also a work by a writer? Maybe in some distant future the diary would be evaluated from a literary point of view. So a diary can't be written carelessly. Before writing he thought for a moment of taking up some great writer's autobiography as a model, say the Occult Diary of Strindberg, but no such work was available to him right then. Finally he decided to stick to his own style.

Writing anything is always a problem for a writer. Even a minor writer, when he puts pen to paper, tends to believe that with those few lines he is going to achieve immortality. Therefore, a writer does not want to leave behind anything that could lessen his reputation in the eyes of future generations. Even in mundane letters and application forms he uses certain literary words and expressions. Needless to say, these literary gems meant for a future readership become the butt of jokes and ridicule among his contemporaries.

He sat for a long time in front of the paper with his two words: "Dear Jester." Writing the first sentence is always difficult, as is deciding on a title for a piece. Luckily, this writer did not have to search for a title. It is often as difficult to find a title as to write the piece itself. It is like the riddle: which comes first, the chicken or the egg. What should one do first: decide on the title or start writing the piece? A title has to prompt readers to pick up the book. It is claimed that a story, to be interesting, must contain elements of

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nobility, religion, sex and suspense. To demonstrate this, someone supposedly once wrote a mini-story in one line: "The princess said, 'Oh God, I'm pregnant but I won't say who the father of the child is.'"

Oh yes, we were talking how to begin a piece of writing. It should begin in such a way that the reader cannot put the book down. A Shakespeare play has a messenger enter with two severed heads and a hand. After such an introduction, the reader can only continue. But then, a dramatic beginning is not always possible. There is a limit to how much everyday events can be dramatised, and readers are often leery of anything too dramatic. Sometimes there are reports in the newspapers of brothers, separated thirty years before, meeting again. The report is true but if any writer writes such a story, readers will dismiss it as the stuff of Hindi films.

Readers always distrust writers. It is a problem when you write a story based on fact, it is also a problem when the whole thing is fiction. Think of that evening in the press club. It should be truthfully narrated, and at the same time it should be made literary. So he started writing, "On this evening overhung with lachrymose clouds ...". He wrote it that way because he liked the words; he had not looked out of the window to see if the sky was cloudy nor did he know if it would rain. He let this half-truth be, since what mattered was not the weather but his friends' discussion. What did it really matter whether the evening was rainy or cold?

The next problem was giving his friends names. It has been said, "What's in a name? A rose is a rose." Someone

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once attributed this to Shaw; when corrected the person is supposed to have replied, "What's in a name?" It's not easy to give characters names. You begin a story with a character named Sumit. As the story progresses, other characters make their appearance and events follow one upon another. Suddenly you realise that the name of the character can't be Sumit. So you change it to Bibhuti. But in places in the story you forget to make the correction. When the readers go through the story they are confused to find someone called Sumit breaking into the story now and then! All these problems would be solved if, instead of calling him by a name, a character was addressed according to his personality or physical description, his job, etc., such as bald-head, camel-face, winking-eye, poet or insurance agent. But such a way of doing things is not common in literature; a character has to have a name.

You'll probably say that naming a character is not such a big deal after all. But just go and see in a family with a newborn. While there are many names to choose from, parents have a hard time settling upon one. Often even on the name-giving day a decision still hasn't been made and only a temporary name is given, postponing the choice to the future. It happens that since a name hasn't been chosen, a temporary name is registered at school. In the end, a boy gets his degree under his nickname, Babla! Or, someone will suggest picking a dozen names out of the telephone directory and using them in a story. But as any author worth his salt will tell you, such names are only good for filling directory pages; none suits his characters.

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Another suggestion is that the writer use names of his acquaintances for his characters. Suppose, he is writing about three lecturers. When he was at college there were three lecturers: Bhikari Babu, Kangali Babu, Fakir Babu. All three names connote poverty and caused laughter among the students. If he were to use such names in a story, it wouldn't sound credible. Take for example his friends at the press club. One of them was Subhranshu Shekhar. Such a name is fine for certificates, passports, ration cards, etc. but it will not do in a story. Readers will object to it on the ground that the name is a tongue-twister. They will complain that instead of choosing simple names authors choose names that are hard to pronounce. The writer knows, however, that is where the shoe pinches. If he names his character plainly, all male characters in all his stories will have names like his, Devashish, and all the female characters will be called Reena.

Well, let's solve the problem by calling the friend at the Press Club simply Shekar. But if our writer were to describe the events the way they happened it would be insulting for him. Would anyone like to make his own embarrassments public? How many autobiographies, written in any language, are completely truthful? How many unpleasant events have been deleted in the process of editing the text? When writing an autobiography there are so many considerations. You can reveal your weaknesses and drawbacks but what right do you have to hurt the feelings of those who had entered your life?

For that reason, the writer has to use his imagination. Certainly he can dissect what happened at the club, construct

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the event the way he likes, exaggerate what supports his position, and create out of it a literary piece. He can defeat his boastful friends and dismiss their hurtful jokes. Why should he be afraid of anybody when he has such a powerful weapon, his endless imagination?

An author's imagination, however, is not always inexhaustible and all-powerful. He was reminded of a story he once was writing about a famine. Rice was not available in the remote areas. Once it started raining, it could not be transported to the people affected. His story became stuck in the middle: people were starving, and district headquarters was busy making arrangements to make rice available. Waking up one morning he decided to continue the story to the point where rice was available once again. So long as he had pen in hand he thought, why should innocent people starve?

That is not what happened. The rains came, and people did not get rice. He was not writing about starving people alone; there were also the inefficient administrators and the opportunistic rice merchants. In spite of his best efforts, they could not decide on the price of rice, the cost of transportation and the bribes to be given. His pen couldn't save the lives of those starving people.

Reminded of this, he became upset. No, the writer should not be so emotional about his writing, he thought. Who was he to change society? Would there ever be fire at the tip of his pen? Would literature ever bring about a revolution? It would be enough if he could truthfully and

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honestly depict the events he came across in his life. His concern was not to bring about a revolution. If he could, why sit at a desk, pen in hand? Instead, he should go out into the streets shouting slogans, raising his clenched fist.

Now he could not think of anything. He stopped writing. It was no use staring blankly at the empty page. Instead, he would go to Reena's house. Reena would be alone. He was not very sure, though, whether she would be happy to see him, but he would give it a try. Whether it turned out to be pleasant or not, their meeting would certainly provide material for his diary. Catching himself thinking like this he felt bad. Were all relationships solely material for his writing? He was reminded of when they had first met. At the time it was as if he lived only for Reena. He felt he had to tell her everything he did or saw. As a result, he did nothing that could not be recounted to Reena. All this was now a thing of the past. Gradually their relationship had undergone a change.

Setting foot outside the house, the first blank page of his diary flashed before him. He was preoccupied with filling it, as if he lived each day of his life only for his diary. Now he stepped into the shoes of a writer, from whose vantage point he would be able to objectively study Devashish's going to see Reena. Although he was himself doing the observing, he placed more emphasis on his role as the observer than as the observed. He had turned into two people: one was the lover going to meet his beloved, while the other—the diarist—followed him invisibly, paying close attention to his every step.

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Devashish rang the door bell at Reena's house. It took a long time before anyone came to the door. He grew impatient. At last he heard Reena's voice, "Who is it?" Irritated, Devashish answered, "It's me." Hearing his voice, Reena opened the door and went back inside. She was wearing a wet sari. For a moment Devashish thought of embracing her, but there was no use spoiling the clothes he had put on that morning. He told Reena he had had to wait a long time for her to answer the door. Reena could have asked him how she could have known someone would ring her door bell so early in the morning, but instead she said, "Wait a minute, and let me change my sari." Devashish sat down, and leafed through the magazines.

He thought to himself, it would have been too dramatic if Devashish had embraced Reena. As it was, Reena was going to change her sari. Then he imagined in vivid detail what would have followed. It was at that point that Reena came back wearing a fresh sari. Now she would not let him touch her, saying her sari would be crumpled.

Devashish looked at Reena with a writer's eye. She sat opposite him serenely while he pretended to read a magazine. "What time is it by your watch?" she asked. "Already ten? The maid servant comes at ten thirty. You have to leave before she comes. Meanwhile I can give you only a cup of tea." Saying this, she went to make the tea. Devashish returned to his magazine. He didn't get up and follow her, as he usually did, to help her make the tea, despite her futile attempts at dissuading him. Now Devashish wasn't in the

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mood. He knew her reaction to his every action, what was going to follow what. He had no curiosity left.

Reena placed a cup of tea before him and said, "See if it has the right amount of sugar." Devashish thought to himself, no Reena, please don't speak of such mundane things. Please say something romantic which I can confide to my diary. He didn't put down the magazine, instead he took the cup to his lips and tasting it, said, "It's fine." "Did I tell you that I didn't get that job?" Reena asked. "I'll have to look for another."

Reena sat quietly in front of him and drank her tea. She told him what had happened at the job interview. Devashish was looking at a picture in the magazine and thinking of a better caption than what was printed. There was no excitement in Reena's voice. She seemed like a character in some story, not a human being of flesh and blood.

Reena put her cup down. Looking at her, Devashish handed her his empty cup. "Did you remember to bring the book from the library, the one I told you about," asked Reena. Devashish didn't hear her. He said, "I'll forget again; better write it down on a piece of paper. Once I'm at the library, that will remind me." Reena got up to fetch a piece of paper. Seen from behind, she looked beautiful. It would require a small paragraph to describe her walk.

Reena handed him the piece of paper. Devashish had no interest in finding out about the book she wanted. Looking at his watch he stood up and said, "I have to leave." They could have made plans, as to how they could tactfully avoid

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the attention of the maidservant as they had done in the past. It was of no use now, however, except as material for his story. Reena said, "When you come next time, let me know ahead of time." Devashish used to get cross at her for such remarks and would grumble, "That means, you don't want me to come." Then a quarrel would ensue, followed by a reconciliation with many bitter-sweet phrases. Now there was no passion in Reena's words; her statements were cut and dried. Devashish replied, "Okay, I will."

Now he saw Devashish returning home desperate, dejected and without any feelings; dejected as a writer, not as a lover, with all the fear and anxiety of returning to the blank sheet of paper. In the meanwhile he has completely forgotten about Reena. His sole thought is how to fill up the pages. Thinking of his helpless condition, he smiles to himself, a wry smile. He is overcome with pity for himself. Dear Jester, how truly difficult it is to be a writer!

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These stories have been translated from the author's award-winning Oriya collection,where characters are implicated in relationships they neither control nor fully understand.

A husband's discovery leads him to doubt whether he ever truly knew his wife. A daughter's marriage concretises a rupture begun long before with her parents' attempts to have control over her life. A writer confronts his need for recognition and ponders the nature of true success.

Relationships here are paradoxical, never simple, often confining or disappointing, at times liberating, strongest when opposition to their realisation exists, disappearing as the obstacles fall away...

Dr J.P. Das is an eminent Oriya poet, playwright, fiction writer, art historian and critic. Some of his earlier collections of short stories in English translation are *The Magic Deer, The Spider's Web, The Prostitute,* and *The Pukka Sahib*. His books have been widely translated into Hindi, English and other Indian languages, and his plays have been performed in many languages in different parts of India. **Rabindra K. Swain** is Managing Editor of the journal, *Chandrabhaga* and has published three books of poems. **Paul St. Pierre** is a Professor of Translation at the University of Montreal, Canada.

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